

tied with uncertainty and with lust by coffeeandchemicals

Series: 'cause without you there I don't think I could close my eyes
[2]

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Summary:

The first time Steve Harrington kissed Billy Hargrove it was a Thursday. It was July 4th and afterimages of those traditional fireworks were still hanging in the air. Steve was in a sailor's outfit, with shorts that were bordering on too short and a shirt of the red, white, and blue variety – it was all very patriotic. It sounds romantic.

It wasn't.

This is a companion/sequel to [sang the sun in flight](#).

1. a constant knot in my gut

Author's Note:

Hi everyone!

I decided to write a companion/sequel to [sang the sun in flight!](#)

The tags/rating might change if I decide to try my hand at writing some explicit stuff (I've never done that, so... it might not happen).

I think the tags pretty much cover all the trigger warnings. Please let me know if I missed something.

I hope everyone is doing okay!

The first time Steve Harrington kissed Billy Hargrove it was a Thursday. It was July 4th and afterimages of those traditional fireworks were still hanging in the air. Steve was in a sailor's outfit, with shorts that were bordering on too short and a shirt of the red, white, and blue variety – it was all very patriotic. It sounds romantic.

It wasn't.

The fireworks had been used to kill – maim? Slightly slow down? Annoy? – an interdimensional monster. Steve's sailor's outfit had been covered in blood and gore, and his face was a patchwork of bruises from a recent encounter with a somewhat surly Soviet soldier. And Billy was dying.

Or was he already dead?

Steve couldn't tell, he just kept breathing air into Billy's lungs according to Nancy's directions. And hoped that it was not in vain.

So, the first time Steve kissed Billy it was only a kiss in the basest sense of the word – mouth on mouth, lips on lips. There was no lust or arousal or any kind of emotion behind it except fear. Fear because Billy was dying. Fear because they *all* could have been dying. But,

mostly, fear because Steve saw Billy sacrifice himself to the Mind Flayer and *this*, well, this changed Steve's entire understanding of who Billy was as a person.

And it really fucked him up.

Because, if Billy could change, then everything that Steve thought with absolute certainty could be entirely wrong.

Steve had put Billy neatly into the “scary asshole” box. His compartmentalization had been reconfirmed after that night in November when Billy had managed to fracture Steve's cheekbone, give him a concussion, and basically put him out of commission for a month. So, yeah, Steve thought he was pretty accurate in pigeonholing Billy as a “fucking dick”. Someone who was violent, loud, abrasive, selfish, and explosive – someone who couldn't be contained in the skin they were in, the edges fraying, constantly threatening to rip open, allowing their essence to spill out.

But. But then Billy had to go and upend all of that.

And this left Steve with a knot of confusion in his gut, laced through with regret, tinged with the overall uncertainty that his neatly organized world – which wasn't all that neat or all that organized considering the shit he had to deal with (but he liked to lie to himself) – was going to implode.

Billy had put himself between El and the fucking Mind Flayer – Steve found out later that it had made its body from the unsuspecting citizens of Hawkins, because, of course, something that fucked up would happen in this fucking shithole of a town – with the intention of sacrificing himself for a girl he barely knew. Or maybe didn't know at all.

(Later, Steve wondered if Billy had anyone who would have done the same for him – put themselves between Billy and the danger. Short answer – no. Long answer – fuck no.)

And, because Billy hadn't been told anything – nothing about the Mind Flayer, the gate, El, Demodogs, Demogorgons, *anything* – he'd hadn't known that Joyce and Hopper were trying to close the gate.

Not that they'd been totally sure this would've stopped the Mind Flayer – but they reasoned that severing the connection between it and the Upside Down would kill it.

Maybe.

Hopefully.

So, to anyone who knew absolutely nothing about the fucked-up situation that they were in, putting themselves between a giant fucking monster and a little girl would be suicide. And yet, when faced with the choice between running and saving himself or protecting someone who appeared to be weaker than him, Billy chose the latter. He did this and, Steve assumed, he had not expected to survive. Steve didn't think he was going to survive either. (Who would survive after being pierced in so many spots by fucking tentacles?) But Billy did it anyway – that noble sacrifice.

Well. Steve didn't want to accept that. He was wondering how he could have gotten Billy so *wrong*. And now he'd never know, because Billy was dying. Billy was dying on the dirty floor of a stupid mall. He'd be dead and his death would be covered up, written off, hidden away. And then no one would know what Billy had done. How he'd saved everyone – how he'd thought so little of his own life that he'd give it up for a girl he didn't know.

Steve wasn't accepting that.

He had run down to Billy after the monster had collapsed, after hearing Dustin scream, "Close it! Close it now!" Robin had been right behind him. Nancy and Jonathan had come running down from the other side of the mall. Nancy had taken charge, which was good, because once Steve saw Billy's wounds, his broken body, partially hidden under Max as she screamed his name, Steve thought that he might actually give in to his stupid breakdown – which he'd been holding off since coming down from whatever drugs had been injected into him by that fucking Russian.

"Right, me and you," Nancy said to Steve, "are on CPR. Jonathan, you and that girl–"

“Robin,” supplied Robin, as she moved towards Jonathan.

“Robin. Jonathan, you and Robin, try to stop his bleeding – apply pressure to as many wounds as you can see.”

“What about his chest?” Jonathan asked, “You can’t really do chest compressions when there’s nothing stable to compress.”

“I can do it,” said El, quietly, but with certainty. “I can keep his heart going.”

“Okay. C’mon, Steve, let’s do this,” said Nancy, as she leaned over Billy and tilted his head back to clear his airway. Steve hovered next to her – he ended up doing most of the breathing as Nancy took over the timing aspect of things. Between breaths, Steve could see that El was getting tired as her face paled and her nose bled. Max was standing beside her, grasping her shoulder as if she could somehow give El her own energy. Mike was standing behind the two of them, face white, but determined, as he surveyed the wreckage that the Mind Flayer caused. Joyce and Hopper showed up hours later – it was actually only minutes, but to Steve it felt like an eternity – and Joyce helped staunch the blood flow once she’d seen that both Will and Jonathan were okay, at least physically. Steve found out later that Hop had called Doc Owens and he was the one that called the army in with their specialized doctors.

All this Steve found out later, because his world had narrowed to Nancy’s voice, Billy’s lips, and his own fatiguing lungs as he breathed air into Billy. The repetitive action of the CPR – *breath, one, two, three, breath, one, two, three* – allowed Steve’s brain to wander. And it hit him, low in his gut – coiling around that existing knot of uncertainty and regret – how *intimate* this situation was – he was literally giving Billy the air from his lungs – something from Steve’s body was going into Billy’s. And, yeah, that was a weirdly, sexual way to think about this *situation* – but his brain did weird things under stress. Weird fucking things.

Would Billy hate him?

Would Billy hate the fact that he’d been so vulnerable in front of Steve?

Billy probably wouldn't think of him at all. If he survived that is. And, given the amount of black shit that was flooding out of Billy's body, mingling with the blood that was already pooling around him, Steve didn't think the odds of Billy surviving were that high. But Steve persisted, continued breathing when Nancy told him to, hoped El was pulsing Billy's heart to move the blood through his body. Steve hoped and hoped and *hoped* it would be enough.

Because Billy deserved better than this. Better than bleeding out in a mall. Better than being a footnote in the forgotten annals of Hawkins' fucked-up history. Better than a villain turned monster turned *actual person* who wasn't going to get a second chance to fully form.

2. a haunted man who can't outrun his ghosts

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey everyone! So, originally I was going to make this chapter much longer - but I figured that more smaller chapters would be easier than fewer longer chapters.

There are some depictions of violence and aftermath of abuse in this chapter, so if that's a trigger, please don't read!

The first time Steve Harrington dreamed of Billy Hargrove it was a Friday. It was July 5th and Steve had been up for more than twenty-four hours. He'd collapsed face first onto his bed, barely managing to kick off his shoes before swinging his legs up onto it. Steve was still in the sailor's uniform and the shorts were still too short. But the shirt was now mostly various shades of brown and black, with just hints of blue showing through. The brown was dried blood, crusting and flaking at the edges; the black was the Mind Flayer's essence, it had leaked out of Billy – out of his pores, his mouth, his eyes, his nose, his ears – and soaked into Steve's clothes as he breathed air into him.

(Steve had the wonderful privilege of tasting that black shit as it escaped Billy's body through his mouth – it tasted of chemicals and death – and, no matter how much coffee he drank or how many cigarettes he smoked or how much gum he chewed or how many times he brushed his teeth, Steve could not get rid of the taste. It lingered for days after, making Steve nauseous, light-headed, and unable to eat much – his food took on the taste as soon as he took a bite. It was disgusting.)

So, Steve gave in to the crash from the adrenaline and tiredness that swept through his body. He passed out on his bed, fully clothed, reeking of sweat, blood, chemicals, *fear*, and dreamed of Billy.

It was not a pleasant dream. Not at all.

It was a nightmare.

Steve jerked awake and rolled over to stare at his ceiling. His heart was racing and for a second he thought he was still trapped in the Soviet base, being tortured by that soldier. But when Steve recognized the familiar sights of his own room, he took a stuttering inhale, and tried to unclench the muscles that had tightened with his automatic fear response. He was drenched in sweat – it darkened the remaining blue of his uniform to black. He checked the clock and realized that he'd been asleep for maybe an hour at most. But he didn't think he'd be able to go back to sleep. It was going to be a long night.

Convincing himself that he'd feel better if he were clean, Steve decided to shower. He shuffled to his bathroom, legs stiff with the previous day's – week's? – exertions, head throbbing with the quick rhythm of his heart. Steve didn't think it was possible for him to feel as bad as he did after that night in November, but fucking Hawkins had proved him wrong. Again.

When he got to the bathroom, he steeled himself to look at his injuries. Steve let out a groan as he saw his face in the mirror, and yeah, it was fucked up. Really fucked up. His eye was swollen shut, surrounded by the reddish purple of a bruise that was still blossoming. He poked at his nose and decided that it wasn't broken, just bruised. The lower half of his face had dried blood and black shit all over it from when he–

kissed Billy

–gave Billy CPR. He looked like a monster out of one of the horror movies Dustin was always trying to get him to watch. He looked disgusting. He *felt* disgusting. Steve gingerly stripped off his shirt and pushed down his shorts and boxers. He awkwardly hopped on one foot and then the other as he got his socks off. He left his clothes in a heap on the floor and made himself a mental reminder to wash – *burn* – them.

The spray of hot water was wonderfully excruciating – it stung the open wounds on his face, it beat at the bruises that covered his body, it soothed his aching muscles. For a long time, Steve just stood under the water – his arm out, hand against the back wall of the shower, supporting his fatiguing body – and let it wash away the blood and

grime as if it could get rid of the events of the previous day. It turned the water swirling down the drain into a dark brown – the combination of blood and the Mind Flayer’s essence – and then red – blood from Steve’s face as his wounds opened again – and then pink – as the bleeding slowed – and then clear. Finally, Steve washed his hair and then his body, noting the multitudes of bruises on his ribs and back and legs. He was going to be in so much pain.

He was already in so much pain.

Steve almost – *almost* – collapsed on his bed when he finally made it back to his room. (He hadn’t been actually sure he was going to make it back to his room – he’d almost made camp in the hallway – he didn’t think his body had enough energy to get back there. But it did. Barely.) Steve had all his body weight on his right hand – the one that he’d unconsciously thrown out to stop his fall onto the bed – and a sob was working its way up to the lump in his throat. He was so fucking tired. He didn’t want to deal with this – *any of this* – and now he couldn’t even sleep because his bed was covered in blood, sweat, grime, viscous monster essence. It reeked of fear and despair. And Steve–

couldn’t handle it

–didn’t have enough energy to do something about it. He awkwardly turned himself around and slid down to the floor, his back rested against the bed, his head tipped back, eyes closed.

Breathe. Just breathe.

The Mind Flayer is looking at him, it’s moving towards him, the tentacles are piercing his–

Steve’s head shot up, his neck immediately protested, his swollen eye throbbing with every pulse of his heart. It was just a dream, only a dream. Steve’s arm was already reaching for his bat – it was still crusted in blood and gore, he’d have to clean it – and rested it across

his legs, which had splayed out as his body had drifted off to sleep. Steve took a few more deep breaths, thumbs moving up and down the handle of the bat, reassuring himself that it was there. His eyes grew heavy – the time between blinks lengthening.

Billy reaches out for him but he's too weak and his arm falls back to the ground. Steve's trying to get to him, but the Mind Flayer has already punctured its tentacle through him – it hurts. His chest is on fire, blood is streaming out of his mouth, he can't breathe, he–

Someone was screaming, yelling. It was him. He shouted himself awake, his hands were on his chest, clawing at a tentacle that... was not there. His bat had fallen off his legs and Steve felt a sting coming from his thigh where the nails had scraped his skin as it fell. His heart raced and breaths came in quick pants. Steve was aware that he was almost having a panic attack. He had to slow down his breathing. He grabbed the bat again and thought back to giving Billy CPR – *breath, one, two, three, breath, one, two, three* – it was not quite the right rhythm, but Steve clung to it. His breathing eventually slowed down. He fought exhaustion. Steve felt his eyelids close, unable to summon the energy to keep them open. His last coherent thought echoed the one he had earlier – it was going to be a long night.

Steve was right – that night and the ones that followed were fucking long. Long because he slept in fits and starts, punctuated by violent dreams. Long because he spent more time looking out his window or at his ceiling or through his open bedroom door than with his eyes closed. Long because he replayed July 4th on a loop until the details were so cemented in his brain that it became a running commentary, a background to whatever he was doing – some part of his brain was always thinking about what had happened. Long because when he was finally drifting off, feeling somewhat safe and relaxed enough to do so, his brain would bring up Billy's face – covered in black shit but so pale beneath, blue eyes open and staring – and Steve would feel fear and regret sweep through him – fear because he still didn't know if Billy was going to survive and regret because he hadn't tried to

help Billy before he'd been flayed.

Steve hated being right. He just wanted some fucking sleep.

Billy had been declared "stable" – whatever that meant – the second week of July. Steve heard from Max, who heard from her mom, who heard from Doc Owens that all they could do now was wait.

(Steve hated waiting – especially when he didn't know what he was waiting for – Billy would either live or die and there was no indication as to what outcome would occur.)

Doc Owens cornered him in the hallway outside Billy's room at the end of July and told him that the only reason Billy was alive was because Steve and his friends had acted so quickly.

"It's almost a miracle," the doc said, his hand resting on Steve's shoulder in a gesture that was supposed to be reassuring, but it just made Steve uncomfortable – physical contact was not something he'd gotten regularly growing up.

Steve didn't know what to say, so he just nodded.

Doc Owens smiled, and then added, "I mean, just look at him – he's doing so well."

"Well" was clearly a subjective assessment. All Steve could see were the machines that were keeping Billy alive – breathing for him, monitoring his heart, feeding him – without them, Billy would cease to exist.

(Steve wondered if Billy technically existed right now, given that he was in a deep coma. What of Billy that made him Billy was actually left?)

Steve just nodded again, because he really didn't know what to say to

that, and shrugged off Owens's hand, feeling both guilty and relieved to be leaving the hospital – because Billy couldn't leave it. Billy might never leave it.

Steve leaned against the hospital wall, the bricks snagging his tee-shirt, his hands shaking as he tried to light a cigarette. He inhaled the smoke and closed his eyes; he couldn't get the picture of Billy hooked up to all those machines out of his head. Steve didn't know which image was worse – Billy dying in a pool of blood or Billy hooked up to those machines with his eyes taped closed. Steve felt his regret hit him in the stomach when he thought of Billy filled with so much vivacity, so much life, and how he'd been reduced to this hollowed shell.

(Steve's regret deepened when El had told him, while they were sitting in Billy's hospital room, what she'd seen in Billy's head – Billy as a little kid with a loving mother, Billy as a little kid with a father who liked to beat him up, Billy as a little kid, like all other little kids who were supposed to be protected. This regret turned into a constant knot when Steve had heard the doc talking to Hop about Billy's x-rays – all the old fractures that had healed or were still healing, the thickening of bones due to constant and repeated impacts – hard strikes to the ribs and legs. It made Steve physically ill to think about all the stuff that wouldn't show up on the x-rays – all the soft tissue injuries that maybe wouldn't heal, all the things that didn't quite leave a permanent mark, all the injuries that still caused Billy pain that he had to just suffer through.

Steve wanted to throw up.

Steve wanted to kill Neil. Who could do that to their own kid?

Steve knew that Hop wanted to kill Neil.

Neil probably knew that too and that was why he had left, skipped town so he didn't have to face the consequences of his brutal actions.

Steve hated Neil viscerally – just thinking about Neil caused his stomach to roil, his heart to race, and his jaw to clench. Steve had to physically restrain himself from lashing out at what or whoever was around him.

Fucking Neil.)

Through the rest of July and most of August, Steve and sleepless nights grew from passing acquaintances to work colleagues who exchanged inside jokes and shared an occasional after-work beer to best fucking friends who finished each other's sentences. And Steve didn't know what to do about it. He was still functioning – barely – on some level (he didn't know what the level was though, maybe the basement or sub-basement?) so he decided on the tried and true “wait and see” approach.

(Also known as the “do nothing” approach.)

(Also known as the “ignore your problems and hope they go away” approach.)

(Steve was really good at ignoring shit until it either got way too big to ignore – usually resulting in some type of implosion – or it fizzled out. Procrastination was pretty cool like that.)

Steve's mornings took on a routine that was both comforting and extremely disheartening in its sameness. Everyday he woke up – or decided to get out of bed if he'd already been awake for hours staring at the ceiling – and he checked the calendar that hung on his wall next to his bedroom door. His eyes would jump from the current date back to July 4th and his brain would supply the time that had passed. At first, it was in days, then days turned to weeks and then, finally, months. Steve dreaded the day he'd say to himself, “One year.”

Then, on autopilot, he'd pull on shorts and a tee-shirt and trudge down the stairs, willing his legs to work properly so he wouldn't fall head-first down them – this had happened twice already and Steve was still sporting a purplish bruise on his cheekbone from when it had bounced off the bannister last week. He was normally not this clumsy; he had excellent speed and balance from years of playing basketball, snowboarding, and other sports. He had an innate sense of body awareness, which made his balance spectacular – but that had disappeared hand-in-hand with his fucking sleep.

It was so fucking great.

Once Steve made it downstairs – hopefully without incident – he'd make coffee and take a cup outside to sit next to his pool – the one that Barb had died in, the one that he hadn't been in for almost two years, the one that had made him begin to associate the light blue of the water with death. Steve sipped his coffee, smoked a cigarette, stared at the pool, and tried to jumpstart his brain.

On this particular morning, Steve thought of his parents – they hadn't even come home when he told them about the “collapse” at the mall. Before all this shit had happened with the Upside Down, Steve had been more than fine with the amount of time his parents were gone – especially since his dad always seemed so disappointed in him – his grades weren't good enough – “You got 80 percent on your last math test, I thought you were smarter than that” – he didn't have enough drive and wouldn't accomplish anything in his life – “When I was your age, I'd already started my business, I went to college to get *connections*, what have you done?” – why was he spending so much time with those *kids* – “It's weird, Steve, you should have friends your own age.” But now, Steve would have liked someone – anyone – even his dad with his constant looks of disappointment – around so he wouldn't have to be alone.

Steve took a drag on his cigarette and thought of the time when he was thirteen. Tommy had come over to Steve's big, empty house and marveled at the freedom that Steve had. But Steve had seen Tommy with his parents. Tommy's parents actually gave him hugs, put band-aids on scraped knees, grounded him when he'd done something wrong. They called Steve's house if Tommy stayed over too long. They actually had feelings for their child – love, fear, irritation, pride

– Steve could only remember cold indifference and disappointment. Growing up, Steve knew, in some part of his child’s brain, that his parents weren’t like other parents, but Tommy’s reactions to Steve’s empty house and Steve’s own gut reactions of intense *envy* for what Tommy had, had confirmed this difference.

Envy and jealousy and anger with his parents roiled in Steve’s stomach, combining with that knot of regret, to make Steve feel like he was going to throw up. He took another drag of his cigarette, another sip of his coffee, and wondered if Billy would feel the same envy and jealousy and anger about Neil that Steve felt about his dad. Steve wondered if he and Billy would ever get to commiserate over having such shitty parents – although Billy had won that one by a mile. Steve wondered if they would ever get to sit by his pool, both drinking coffee and smoking, in some sort of companionable silence.

Steve wondered if he’d ever get a good night’s sleep again.

Steve wondered if Billy dreamed like he did – stuck in some endless cycle of nightmares that he couldn’t wake up from. Steve hoped not. Because Billy deserved better than being stuck in a personal hell of never-ending torment and torture.

Steve brought his shaking hand up to his mouth to take a final drag of his cigarette and then stubbed it out in the ashtray next to him. Billy deserved better than Neil. Billy deserved better than being possessed by the Mind Flayer. Billy deserved better than wasting away in a coma. Billy just deserved better. Steve wondered if he could give Billy something better – because he knew what it was like to be alone, dealing with shit that should be impossible, and wishing he had someone to reach out to. Maybe he could be that someone for Billy.

If Billy ever woke up.

Notes for the Chapter:

As always, thank you for reading! Any feedback is so appreciated!!

Stay safe.

3. they're in my skin and my bones

Notes for the Chapter:

I think the trigger warnings are similar to those of the previous chapter - violence, abuse, etc. So don't read if this will trigger you!

The first time Steve Harrington held Billy Hargrove's hand it was a Wednesday. It was August 29th and Steve had found himself wandering into Billy's hospital room that evening because he didn't want to sit at home, alone. He and Dustin had already stopped by earlier that day after he had picked up Dustin from the arcade. Dustin had been sure that Max would be there – “She wasn't at the arcade, where else would she be, Steve?” He'd been full of energy and talking loudly – the kid seriously had no volume control – and Steve had been positive that they were going to get yelled at by the nurses that kept ducking in and out of Billy's room.

“No, stop. Dust- stop, what are you doing?” Steve reached out to grabbed Dustin's arm to stop him from poking Billy in the shoulder, right where his stereotypical tattoo, a skull smoking a cigarette – there was some irony in there somewhere – was concealed by a white bandage.

It was the middle of the afternoon and the sun was beating down through the hospital window. It made the room warm and Steve sleepy – not that this was difficult given the almost two months of relatively sleepless nights.

“Steve,” said Dustin, meeting Steve's eyes, and giving him a meaningful look that Steve had absolutely no idea how to interpret.

“No,” said Steve, voice tinged with exasperation. “Seriously, Dustin, why are you *poking* him?”

“Because science, Steve! *Science*.” Dustin punctuated this non-answer with an eyebrow wiggle that Steve *really* did not know how to

interpret.

“Science? What does that even mean? That doesn’t explain anything.”

“Curiosity voyages, Steve,” said Dustin, sagely, nodding, as if this explained *everything*.

It didn’t. It explained absolutely nothing. Steve’s follow-up was an eloquent, “Huh?”

“Research! We gotta ask him what he felt when he wakes up.”

“Yeah... I’m pretty sure comas don’t work that way, buddy.” Steve reached for Dustin’s shoulder with his right hand and tried to steer him towards the door.

“But the doctor said...”

“Yeah, the doctor said it might help to *talk* to him, not poke him.”

“But maybe it’ll *annoy* him enough that he’ll wake up.” Dustin’s face split into a wide grin, which fell almost instantly. Steve was sure Dustin was picturing just what would happen to him if he were to annoy Billy awake – the carnage that would follow would be terrifying, probably slightly entertaining, but mostly terrifying.

“Yeah, seriously don’t think comas work like that,” said Steve, as he attempted to shift his arm around Dustin’s shoulders. Dustin decided that this was a good time to break free for one last attempt at poking Billy. “Dustin, stop!” barked Steve, as he took a few quick steps towards him – sneakers squeaking on the linoleum.

“Steve...”

“No.”

“Stee-eeve,” Dustin whined, trying to give him the puppy-dog eyes look, which failed epically – Dustin just looked like he was hiding something. He looked mischievous rather than guileless.

“No, Dustin, just no,” sighed Steve, shaking his head to emphasize his point.

Dustin gave in and let Steve guide him out of the room. “Fine... but you owe me ice cream.”

“Why? Because I’m not going to keep letting you poke Billy, who’s in a coma, and can’t defend himself?”

Steve ended up dropping Dustin off at the Wheeler’s house for an “epic campaign” and spent the rest of the afternoon driving around. When he’d pulled up to his empty house that evening, Steve had decided that the last thing he wanted to be was alone. Robin was working the closing shift at the video store, Jonathan and Nancy were probably on a date or something – not that Steve wanted to be a third wheel with them – and the kids were playing their weird dragon game. Steve had wished, for a brief second, that he and Tommy had made up or something, just so he could go hang out with the guy – but they hadn’t, and Steve didn’t really want to sink down to Tommy’s level again.

So, Steve had ended up back at the hospital, sitting in the chair next to Billy’s head, with a paperback held open by one hand. He wasn’t really reading the book; he was mostly staring off into space – not that he wasn’t interested in Jack Torrance’s decent into madness – he just didn’t have the attention span right now. The machines provided a repetitive background noise that lulled Steve into a state of almost-sleep.

Beep.

Beep.

Beep.

Beep – beep – beep – beep –

Steve jerked up, heart racing, he’d started dreaming, but the increasing frequency in beeps from the heart monitoring machine had brought him out of it. He shifted closer to watch the rhythm of Billy’s heartbeat displayed on the machine – it was speeding up. Steve wondered if Billy was also dreaming, but unable to wake from it. He

swallowed, reached out his hand, and placed it over Billy's, mindful of the IV that was coming out of the artery – vein? – near Billy's wrist. Steve stroked his thumb over the back of Billy's hand in what he hoped was a soothing gesture.

"It's okay," he said, softly – again trying to be calming. He squeezed Billy's fingers – they were thicker than his, blunter, a bit shorter. Steve noticed absently that Billy's tan had almost faded, and their skin tones were almost the same – it made him sad – something else had been taken from Billy.

The machine continued beeping at its fast pace – Steve wondered if he should get a nurse. When one didn't rush in, he assumed that this was normal, or as normal as being in a coma could get.

"You're in the hospital – in a coma – uh, if you're dreaming, you might be stuck." Steve swallowed, licked his dry lips, and then added under his breath, "Which really fucking sucks." He cleared his throat and said a little louder, "You're not alone, Billy. I'm here – so, uh, if you *are*, y'know, stuck or something, like at Starcourt or something – uh, just know that you're not alone there." Steve inhaled and exhaled, slowly, trying to regulate his breathing and bring his own heartrate back down.

The beeps separated a little bit in response to Billy's heartrate slowing.

Steve nodded and a little smile touched the corner of his lips. "Okay, yeah, talking is good. Uh... Okay. I could, uh, read to you?" He shifted his chair closer so he could settle back with his hand still covering Billy's and used the other to crack open the book.

"So, not sure if you've read this one or not. It's good – creepy – but really good."

Billy's heartrate continued to slow – this was good.

"Okay, so the book is about this family – Jack, the dad, Danny, the son, and Wendy, the mom. And Danny, he has this thing called 'the shining', which is a special power, he can see shit and read minds, y'know, stuff like that. And, Jack, he's a recovering alcoholic, and he

–” *broke Danny’s arm*. Steve was so fucking stupid – he couldn’t read a book where the main character was child abuser to Billy – what the fuck was *wrong* with him?

“You know what, now that I think about it, not a book you’d enjoy. I’ll, uh, bring something else next time,” Steve said, as embarrassment coloured his face. He noticed the heartrate monitor was beeping at the same pace it had been earlier – maybe Billy was just sleeping now, not dreaming.

Steve slid forward and tipped his head back to rest it on the back of his chair. He closed his eyes and rubbed his thumb over Billy’s knuckles – the repetitive movement soothed him and, he hoped, it soothed Billy also.

Steve showed up at the hospital on the following Thursday.

(When he’d looked at the calendar that morning, his brain did the mental math, Steve realized that two months to the day had passed since Starcourt. He couldn’t believe that it was already two months. He couldn’t believe it was *only* two months.)

It had been two months since Billy had almost died and Steve had been feeling that constant knot of anxiety growing in his gut – but that also could have been the excessive amounts of coffee Steve had started drinking to maintain a semblance of normality.

So, Steve showed up at the hospital to see Billy. He wasn’t sure why, but he felt tied to him. Apparently, breathing air into someone to save their life linked you together. Steve hoped he’d never have to repeat the experience to see if this was the case with everyone or if Billy was special.

Steve was about to push the door open when a stray thought raced through his mind. He had been sitting in Billy’s room in the beginning of August – Hop had gone to talk to Doc Owens and had

asked Steve to watch El – he'd been sitting there anyway and hadn't minded the company. El had sat down on the chair next to him and stared unblinking at Billy. They'd sat like that for so long that Steve's eyes had been burning in sympathy for El's eyes.

"Is he in there?" Steve had asked, voice soft, unsure if he'd actually wanted an answer to his question.

"Yes," she'd responded, "he's very far away, very... quiet."

"Oh," he'd said, dumbly, because he hadn't known what that really meant.

"He's... afraid?" she'd continued and then paused, as if she had been listening to a conversation down the hall. "Afraid," she finally said, slowly nodding her head, "but mostly very tired."

"Ah," said Steve, nodding – he got being tired. "Well, he's probably using a lot of energy, y'know, to heal himself."

"Yes," said El, looking Steve in the eyes. Her pointed gaze was disconcerting and it had made Steve shift in his seat. "Healing requires energy. Billy needs rest."

Steve had hummed in agreement and had thought this was the end of the conversation.

"He was really scared," El had said, breaking the silence.

"Huh?" Steve had said. He'd almost dozed off in the heat of the afternoon sun as it pounded against his back through the window.

"At the mall. I talked to him."

"What?"

"When you were breathing, and I was helping his heart – I talked to him."

"Uh." Steve hadn't known what to say to this. "That's..." his voice had trailed off.

“He was scared,” El had repeated. “But he was also tired. Tired like he is now.”

Steve had wanted to say something to comfort her, but the stiff way El had been holding herself indicated that she did not want to be touched.

“He should have been angry,” she’d whispered.

“What?” Steve had repeated, stupidly. He really had no idea where she was going with this.

“I killed him,” El had said simply, looking up to meet his gaze.

“What! No. El, it was the Mind Flayer,” Steve had said, leaning forward, trying to convey comfort without actually touching her.

“It wanted me. If I hadn’t seen his mother and the beach, he wouldn’t have tried to stop it—”

“And he would have been flayed and then absorbed into that *thing*,” Steve had countered. He had gotten out of his chair and had crouched in front of El. “He would have died if you hadn’t done what you’d done.”

“But, without me, there would be no gate, no Mind Flayer, no monsters.”

“Then blame Brenner,” Steve had said, “blame the government. This is not your fault. You’re a kid, El. You were used. This is not your fault.”

El had nodded, but Steve could tell that she was filled with guilt. It lay heavy on her shoulders, weighing her down, and it hurt Steve to see it. He got it though, he carried the same guilt.

All the fucking time.

Steve tried to push that thought away as he entered Billy’s room and stopped short. “Oh.”

“Hi, Steve,” said Max. She was sitting on the end of Billy’s bed, her feet dangling, arms resting loosely on her knees. She’d been crying. Steve could tell because her face was red and splotchy, and her eyes were puffy. He immediately felt like he wanted to both comfort her and back out of the room.

“Uh, hi Max. Wasn’t expecting you to be here.” Steve couldn’t back out of the room now, so he sat on the chair that was turned towards the top of Billy’s bed.

“He’s my brother, Steve, why wouldn’t I be here?” she asked, furtively wiping her nose across the back of her hand.

“I thought he was your stepbrother?” Steve countered, as he stretched out his legs and crossed his ankles. He tried to look relaxed. He tried, but he was pretty sure he failed given how white his knuckles were turning from gripping the armrests.

“Almost dying while trying to save the world upgraded him to full brother.” Max’s eyebrows furrowed as anger spread across her face.

“Oh...” said Steve, drawing out the word and the silence. He found Max confusing, she tended to flip her emotions on a dime – much like Billy, now that Steve thought about it. “Stop glaring at me. Besides, shouldn’t you be in school?”

“Ummmmm...” Max glanced at her feet, clearly hiding something.

“It’s two in the afternoon... on a Thursday...” Steve leaned forward, trying to catch her eye, “Isn’t it like the first week of classes?”

“Maybe.” Max still wouldn’t look at him.

“How’d you even get here? Does your mom know where you are?”

“My mom dropped me off – she stayed for a bit before she went to work.”

“But, like, she does know school is a thing, right?”

“Why do you care, Steve?” Max asked, voice laced with impatience and something that sounded like weariness. Not a good tone for a

kid.

“Because you’re a kid, Max. You need to do normal kid things.”

“Like what? Sitting with my brother, who may never wake up from a coma because he tried to save the world from *interdimensional monsters*,” Max said, finally meeting his gaze to glare him. “That kind of normal kid thing?”

“No,” sighed Steve, “like school. Or playing the stupid dragon thing–”

“Dungeons and Dragons.”

“Yeah. Playing that with the other shitheads. Going to the arcade, skateboarding, doing whatever girly shit you and El do.”

“We read comics, Steve. We kill monsters and read comics. We don’t do *girly* shit.”

“Right, yeah,” he said, nodding, “– all that normal kid shit – not the killing monsters shit.”

“And why do I get to do this ‘normal kid shit’, when Billy doesn’t?”

“Uh.” Shit. Steve had really not thought this through. Because Billy definitely didn’t get to do normal kid shit, not even when he was a kid, apparently. He got to spend his time dodging Neil’s fists. Clearly, Billy had drawn the short stick in this whole life thing.

“If Billy has to stay in the hospital, then at least I can stay with him.”

“Max–”

“Steve–”

“Max. C’mon,” said Steve, reaching out as he saw that Max’s eyes were looking a bit wet. “He wouldn’t want you to spend all day with him, especially now that school’s started.”

“You don’t know that,” snapped Max.

“Yeah. I mean, he was a huge dick. But–”

“Steve, that wasn’t his fault, Neil–” interrupted Max.

“Neil is a bastard of the lowest form,” Steve growled, surprised at how much anger escaped in his voice. Steve took a deep breath to try to get his visceral reaction to Neil under control.

“Yeah. I can’t believe my mom married him.”

“Well. Maybe she sees something in him that we just don’t?”

“Like what, his excellent ability at fracturing ribs?”

“Max!”

“Steve! C’mon. You can’t be trying to defend Neil.” She jumped off the bed and stood in front of Steve, staring down at him. “You saw Billy’s x-rays. *You saw them.* I didn’t help him–”

“Max, you were – *you are* – a kid,” said Steve, standing, trying to regain some control. “Yes, a very scary one sometimes, but still a kid. *A kid.*” He crouched down in front of Max and, in a softer voice, asked, “Did you know about Neil?”

“Sorta. Maybe. I dunno. I knew Neil yelled and I heard banging sometimes. But Billy was just such a dick and Neil was scary – I just didn’t want to think about it.” Max flopped into the chair and wouldn’t meet his eyes.

“Hey, hey. That’s okay, Max. It’s *okay*. You’re okay. It’s okay,” said Steve, and made as if to reach out the comfort her. When she glared at him, Steve threw his hands up, surrendering, and gingerly leaned against the bed.

“It’s not okay. Look at him, Steve, he’s in a fucking coma–” Max gestured violently towards Billy’s head and torso.

Steve sighed and looked. Billy didn’t look like Billy – Steve was hit by this every time he came to visit. When Steve thought of Billy, he thought of Billy on the court, shirt off, tongue out in some obscenely sexual gesture, swaggering as if he owned everyone and everything. And, maybe he did, because Billy had been magnetic, drawing eyes and taking up all the air wherever he went. Billy had been explosive,

energy in human form, he played off people's reactions like he needed them to survive.

But now. Billy was nothing. He was just an empty shell. He was just a reminder of all the things that Billy just *wasn't* – he wasn't running his mouth, he wasn't in Steve's space, he wasn't exuding animal magnetism that made people want him or want to be him. He wasn't. And it made Steve sick.

Steve swallowed and ran his tongue across his lips. When did his mouth get so dry? When did the lump form in his throat? "Yeah," Steve croaked. He swallowed again and continued, "And that's the Mind Flayer's fault – not yours, not his, not fucking Neil's."

"But–"

"But what, Max?" said Steve, crossing his arms over his chest – as if to protect himself, from what, he didn't know, probably his own fucking guilt. "You tried to save him, remember? You and El got him into that sauna. You tried to force it outta him."

"But if he coulda talked to me before then, maybe it wouldn't have happened?"

"Maybe. And maybe if I was nicer to him, or if he was nicer to me, or if Neil wasn't such a fucked-up human being..." Steve exhaled slowly and slumped forward, his feet sliding on the floor. "All these what-ifs. They don't do any good now."

"Do you wish you could change it though?" asked Max, in a small voice that told Steve she was also filled with regrets. They made an excellent pair – both overflowing with regret.

"All the fucking time. I think about everyday." Every night, too, when he couldn't sleep – Steve went through all the things he said or didn't say that could have helped Billy. It was an exercise in futility and it didn't make *anything* better, but Steve couldn't not do it.

"Oh."

"Yeah."

Steve is back at the mall, standing shoulder to shoulder with Billy. He can hear Billy breathing – it's a series of short, gasping inhales followed by tiny exhales – Steve thinks Billy is close to panicking. He grabs Billy's hand and squeezes, trying to calm him down. Billy is terrified and Steve gets this – he'd be terrified too, if he hadn't faced down Demogorgons and Demodogs before. The Mind Flayer is in front of them, exuding a stench of death and chemicals and bile. Steve expects it to attack, but it stands still, as if it's waiting for something. Footsteps sound on the tiled floor and Neil saunters out of the darkness. He stands in front of the monster and smirks – it's a cold, inhuman look, it doesn't reach his eyes. Neil's arms are covered in black veins – he's been possessed – flayed – by the Mind Flayer. Next to Steve, Billy audibly swallows and then exhales a shuddery breath.

"Billy," says Neil, his voice a low growl, "come here." He stretches out his arm, expecting Billy to take his hand. Steve knows that if Billy does, he'll be dead – it doesn't take a genius to understand this.

"No, sir," Billy whispers, he's shaking. Steve steps in front of him, maybe he can protect Billy this time.

"Billy," Neil repeats, and he walks closer to them.

Steve throws out an arm to stop Billy from moving forward. "Fuck you, asshole," Steve says, "you're not getting him."

Neil doesn't respond, just swings his gaze to Steve. Steve can see Neil's irises disappear – bleed into black – as the Mind Flayer takes over. Steve swallows but stands his ground, staring Neil down.

Unfortunately, Steve isn't paying attention to the actual monster, so the tentacles that stab into his sides take him by surprise. He drops quickly, crumples down in an unceremonious heap on the tiled floor. As Steve bleeds out, he sees Neil stalking towards Billy. Then Neil grabs Billy by the throat and lifts him up – Billy doesn't struggle, just hangs there, defeated,

tears rolling down his cheeks.

Steve's vision fades out and the last thing he hears is Neil saying, "Don't be afraid. It'll all be over soon. Just try to hold still."

Steve gasped and flailed for a second until he realized that he was tangled up in his sheets, and once again covered in a sheen of cold sweat. He looked out the window and could see the slight pinkening of the sky indicating that the sun would rise soon. He swung his legs out of the bed, planted his feet, dropped his head between his knees, and tried to slow his breathing. The nightmares were bad enough already, why was Neil showing up in them? Steve got a flash of Billy's face from the end – he'd been so scared and so *resigned* – it made Steve feel sick. If he hadn't dreamt the expression, he didn't think he would've been able to picture it on Billy's face, spreading across his features. But he had dreamt it. And Steve would have placed money on it that Billy looked that way whenever Neil started swinging. Steve didn't know why he cared so much – Billy had been an asshole to him and then just ignored him for half a year–

(although, now that Steve thought about it, he was pretty sure Billy had been watching him because he'd been *everywhere* – screening Steve on the court, laughing loudly in the hallways, leaning against his Camaro, smoking, in the parking lot – or maybe Steve's eyes were just naturally drawn to him?)

–and now Billy was in a coma, with no guarantee he'd wake up.

And there was nothing Steve could do to protect Billy from that.

Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry if this is building slower than you'd like - the first part builds from Steve's perspective.

I always appreciate feedback!

4. I wish I could disappear

Notes for the Chapter:

I don't think there are any additional trigger warnings for this chapter - please let me know if I missed one.

The first time Steve Harrington wiped away Billy Hargrove's tears it was a Saturday. It was October 12th and Steve had just read the most depressing fucking poem in existence. Out loud. To Billy.

It was his fault Billy had been crying.

Steve was an asshole.

(Just something else to tangle into that knot of regret.)

Steve picked Max up early that afternoon – Susan was working – to take her to see Billy. Max had her backpack on her lap and fiddled with the zipper. She'd thrown her skateboard on to the back seat.

"It's been three months," Max blurted out.

Over three months, Steve thought. Instead he said, "Mhmmm. But you saw him last week and everything is healing really well."

"Then why isn't he waking up?"

"I dunno." Steve glanced over and saw Max's incredulous look. "Honestly," he added, "brains are fu– freaking complex."

Max didn't say anything, just hugged her backpack closer to her.

"You want me to stay for a bit?" Steve asked, as he pulled into the parking lot.

"If you want," she shrugged, and reached back to grab her board. "I'm meeting Lucas at the arcade later."

Steve nodded and decided he'd stay for a little while. His excuse was that Billy could use more company, but really, he had nowhere else he needed to be and just didn't want to go home yet.

The air nipped at their noses and cheeks as they ambled into the hospital. The bright sunlight was deceptive and made it seem like it should be warmer than it actually was. The trees had changed colour, the yellows and oranges indicating that summer was well and truly over. Steve wondered if Billy liked fall. He wondered if Billy liked the way the trees looked. He wondered if Billy liked the crispness of the air.

Steve decided that Billy probably didn't like any of those things – summer seemed to run in Billy's blood, glide beneath the surface of Billy's skin – or maybe on the surface, Steve amended, given Billy's perpetual tan... which had since disappeared. That thought hit him in the gut – he kept forgetting that Billy no longer looked like Billy (Billy no longer *acted* like Billy, because he was in a fucking coma) – the King of Summer had died.

"Steve," said Max, voice loud, indicating that she'd probably said his name more than once.

"Huh. What?" said Steve, blinking out of his reverie.

"You gotta sign in," said Max, raising her eyebrows and throwing her head back to gesture at the nurse's station with the clipboard on the desk.

"Right," Steve mumbled, and he wrote his name down below Max's. The nurse glared at him from her place behind the desk – it was her usual expression. She was the spitting image of Nurse Ratched (minus the victory rolls, because it was the fucking '80s) and Steve had to fight a shudder every time he saw her – that movie had given him nightmares.

"Sorry," he said to her, throwing on his patented "aww shucks" grin, trying to make her expression shift. The nurse just raised an eyebrow at him, the air between them remaining icy.

"Okay then..." Steve muttered under his breath, as he turned to

follow Max down the hall to Billy's room.

Max perched herself on one of the visitor's chairs and Steve took the other, letting his legs sprawl out in front of him. Max dug through her bag and pulled out a small stack of books, which she then set on the small table between the chairs. Steve picked them up and scanned the titles – Dylan Thomas's *Collected Poems, 1934–1952*, T. S. Eliot's *Collected Poems, 1909–1962*, and Shakespeare's *The Sonnets*. They were small paperback copies, well-read given the cracked condition of the spines. Steve turned them over slowly in his hands.

"Hey, Max, where'd you find these?"

"In his car, under the passenger seat." Max frowned, looking up from her bag, and then added, "I think he was hiding them from Neil."

Steve felt his stomach tighten when Max said Neil's name – it'd been three months since the man had left Hawkins and Steve still had to fight down a wave of anger whenever he was brought up. If it were up to him that name would be banned. He forced his rage down with the physical act of swallowing – trying to push it back below the lump in his throat and knot of anxiety in his stomach. He said, trying to make his voice unaffected, "Neil'd probably set them on fire."

"Yeah. He's a fucking asshole." Max pulled out a few comics and put them on the table next to the books.

"So... "said Steve, as he set the books back down, "Billy liked – likes – poetry?" Fucking slip of the tongue, he hoped Max hadn't noticed.

By the narrowing of her eyebrows, Max *had* noticed his slip-up. But she just said, "I dunno, Steve. We didn't talk about shit like that – mostly he just yelled at me when Neil made him drive me places." Max took a small breath and then added, "But I guess I know why he did that now."

"He still shouldn't've done that," Steve countered, shifting in his seat.

"Billy doesn't have much self-control."

"Heh. Yeah, I guess so. Definitely not his strong suit." Steve closed his eyes and tipped his head back – a position he seemed to find himself

in whenever he was visiting Billy – the beeping of the machines was soothing for some fucking reason. He let himself drift.

“It’s weird,” said Max, after they’d been sitting in silence for a few minutes.

“What is?”

“Going through his things and finding out he was an actual person.”

“Most people are actual people,” said Steve, with a little laugh, but he got what Max was trying to say – Billy had fucking *layers* that no one knew about it. Steve was still trying to wrap his head around them. Billy had been through shit Steve could only imagine – being abused, being possessed. And now, apparently, he liked fucking *poetry*? More layers. Layers upon layers upon layers.

“But he was just so angry all the time,” sighed Max, unaware of Steve’s sudden fixation on Billy’s layered persona.

“I guess,” said Steve, quietly, “he figured it was easier to be angry than to feel whatever he was feeling?” Steve got that – he wanted to not feel what he was feeling *all* the time. It was easier to pretend everything was fine than face the constant fear and rejection that had filled his life since his parents had decided he could stay home on his own. At first it had only been days and twelve-year-old Steve had liked that freedom. But days had turned into weeks and weeks had turned into months. And Steve had started to wonder what was wrong with him that his parents hadn’t wanted to spend any time with him.

“Woah, Steve,” said Max, voice tinged with slight awe.

“What?” Steve met Max’s gaze, confused.

“When did you get all deep on me?” Max quirked her mouth into a small grin and punched Steve in the shoulder

“Shut up,” said Steve, rubbing the sore spot. “Just because I’ve got this pretty face, doesn’t mean I can’t have insight into shit.”

“You told Dustin to ‘pretend to not care about me’ to get me to like

him – you have no fucking insight,” said Max, using air quotes. She added, almost as an afterthought, “And your face is not that pretty.”

“Shit,” Steve mumbled, face flushing. That had been pretty poor advice in hindsight. “He told you that?”

“Yep,” replied Max, popping the “p”.

“Fine.” Steve shrugged. “Maybe I’m growing as a person. Comes from hanging around with all you dorks. And my face is totally pretty.”

“Uh-huh, right.” Max rolled her eyes and shifted back into her chair.

“Anyways, poetry books? They must’ve been important if he hid them?” asked Steve, as he picked up the top one – Dylan Thomas’s *Collected Poems, 1934–1952* – and started flipping through it.

“Maybe...”

“Well, they don’t look brand new. It’s not like he bought them and threw them in there right before getting possessed.”

“Yeah,” Max agreed, grabbing the next one – Shakespeare’s *The Sonnets* – and turned it over in her hands.

“It looks like he read this one a lot,” Steve said, as the book fell open to a poem due to a crack in the spine – the glue was almost gone and it wouldn’t be long before the pages started falling out. He skimmed the first few lines of “Do not go gentle into that good night” and swallowed, feeling emotion build in his throat. “It’s sad,” Steve whispered, and closed the book, as if he could close out the emotions the poem had evoked.

Max looked up from her own book and asked, “You read it before?”

“Nah. I’m not much for poetry,” replied Steve, as he tried to force a grin across his face. “Shit’s confusing.”

“You find everything confusing,” said Max, as she closed the book and placed it back on the stack.

“Hey!” said Steve, a little affronted.

“Robin told me it took you a month to memorize the menu at Scoops.”

“That’s because I didn’t care,” countered Steve. “Who wants to put in extra effort when you’re being paid a pittance? And when were you talking to Robin?”

“Last week. She hangs out at the arcade with us sometimes. She’s cool.”

“She *is* cool,” said Steve, and then he added, quickly, “don’t tell her I said that.”

“Ha. Right.”

“Have you read any of these?” Steve asked, as he set Dylan Thomas’s works back on the pile.

“I skimmed some,” responded Max, as she flipped open one of the comics that she’d brought.

“Maybe you could read some to him? The doc said we should be talking to him – you know – familiar voices and such.”

“Steve,” Max eyed him, pointedly, “I doubt he wants to hear my voice – he hates me.”

“Hey, I’m sure he doesn’t hate you. Max, you’re the closest thing he’s got to family – unless you know where his mom is–”

“Dead.”

“Oh.” Steve had not been expecting that. “Shit.”

“Yeah,” said Max, looking back down at her comic.

“Well, all the more reason to read to him?” suggested Steve.

Max didn’t say anything for a few minutes. And then she said, in a very small voice, “What if it’s too late? What if he doesn’t wake up?”

“Hey, hey. It’s okay,” said Steve, getting out of his chair to crouch in

front of her. “Billy is strong – if anyone can kick a coma in the ass it’ll be him.”

Max nodded, but it was a slow nod, suggesting that she didn’t really believe him.

Steve sat back down and picked up T. S. Eliot’s *Collected Poems, 1909-1962*. He flipped it open to the first poem – “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” – and wondered who J. Alfred Prufrock was. Steve read the first verse, got to the part about the women talking of Michelangelo, and decided he just *did not* get poetry. He closed the book and wondered, sadly, if he maybe didn’t understand love because he couldn’t understand how that poem was a love song.

Steve tilted his head back and thought of Nancy and of love. His feelings toward her had shifted from love, to love tinged with loathing, to love tinged with deep sadness and hurt, to caring that was sometimes laced with sadness and regret, but mostly just mellowed out to friendship. Steve wanted what he’d had with her – someone he could go to when he couldn’t sleep, someone to talk to about his fears, his hopes, his worries, someone to comfort and to comfort him when the world didn’t make any sense. Well, he thought, rather bitterly, he’d spent the first seventeen years of his life without that, he’d get used to it again.

“I’m gonna go,” said Max, interrupting Steve’s self-pity session.

“Huh,” said Steve, eloquent as always.

“I’ve gotta meet Lucas,” she said, as she packed away her comics.

“Oh. Right.” Steve shook his head to get rid of the remnants of pity. “Did you want a ride?”

“Nah,” replied Max, “I’ll just skate there – it’s still nice out.” She nodded her head to the window to show that the sun was indeed still shining.

“Uh. Yeah, sure,” replied Steve, trying to not feel rejected by a fucking teenager who was five years younger than him. Fuck, he needed some friends his own age.

“Read him something?” suggested Max, as she swung her bag over her shoulder and walked out of Billy’s room.

Well, Steve didn’t have anything better to do, so he picked up Dylan Thomas again and flipped it open to “Do not go gentle into that good night” – Steve wanted to read something to Billy that Billy would actually like.

As Steve finished the last line – “Rage, rage against the dying of the light” – he looked at Billy. He could see tear tracks on Billy’s cheeks reflecting the fluorescent lights.

“I’m sorry, Billy,” whispered Steve, as he stood up and dropped the book back on the table. “I thought you’d want to hear something familiar, y’know?” Steve swallowed and then wiped his thumb up from Billy’s ear to the corner of his eye, trying to dry the wetness. He repeated the action on the other side of Billy’s face.

“I’m really sorry – I won’t read it again. I didn’t mean to make you sad. You got enough shit to deal with without me making things worse,” said Steve, then he added to himself, “fuck, you’re so stupid, Harrington.”

Steve neatened the stack of poetry books and then tucked them under his arm. “I’ll just hold on to these,” he said, “I don’t want them to be lost – they clearly meant – mean – a lot to you if you hid them.”

Steve swallowed and then whispered, “I’ll keep them safe–” *because I couldn’t keep you safe.*

Notes for the Chapter:

As always, I appreciate the comments and kudos!!

Be safe, everyone < 3

5. and run away from all of my fear

Notes for the Chapter:

I don't think there are any additional trigger warnings, but please let me know if I missed something!

The first time Steve Harrington slept with Billy Hargrove it was a Tuesday. It was December 17th and the cold had sunk into Steve's bones making him wearier than usual, which was saying something since most of his nights were still filled with dreams of the mall, the tunnels, the monsters, Billy's resigned face, and Neil's anger. He was exhausted.

Steve had stopped by to see Billy – he was pretty sure the hospital was going to start charging him rent given the amount of time he was spending there. All the nurses had started to recognize him after just two weeks of him showing up – it helped that he flirted outrageously with all of them, even Nurse Dean – *call me Susannah* – who was probably seventy years old. Well, all of them except Nurse Ratched's doppelganger – Steve actively avoided her since he was pretty certain she could steal his soul through his eyes.

On this particular Tuesday, Steve had really needed to get out of the house; his parents had showed up unexpectedly the day before.

"We're throwing a party," his mother had said, as she unpacked her suitcase, running back and forth between it and her closet to hang dresses. "Your father expects you to be there."

Steve had been leaning against the door frame, mind bouncing between incredulity that his parents were home for the first time in six months because they wanted to host *a party* and hurt because his parents were home for this first time in six months and it wasn't to spend time with him. So, his response to his mother had been a swallow to force down the anger, a raised eyebrow, and then a wry "Oh."

“Steve,” his mother had snapped, finally looking up from her unpacking, “this has to happen. You like the nice things you have, don’t you?” His mother had paused as if this wasn’t a rhetorical question – it was – she’d just wanted to drive home her point.

Steve, who had faced down Demogorgons, Demodogs, and the fucking Mind Flayer – and those were only the monsters, never mind being tortured by the fucking Soviets or manipulated by the government – was completely unimpressed. “Right,” he had forced out and then had turned to go.

“Steven,” his mother had called out in a low icy voice.

Steve had paused, still facing away, and taken a few slow, deep breaths. He’d thought of Billy, who had dealt with and was still dealing with so much worse. He’d wondered, briefly, what Billy would do in his situation – probably break something – and he’d decided to focus on what he should do – ignore his feelings and play nice – but that had seemed like admitting defeat. Steve had sighed and decided he was just picking his battles. “Yes,” he’d forced out, turning around, and shoving his hands into his pockets.

“You know how much your father values his image. You know how hard he’s worked.”

Steve had given a one-shouldered shrug in response, because, no, he didn’t *know* those things. He could assume them based on the extreme lack of presence his father had in his life. Steve defined his father by a series of absences: absent on Steve’s birthdays, absent at Christmases, absent from his games, absent when he’d gotten the crap beaten out of him by first Jonathan and then Billy, absent when the fucking mall had “collapsed”, absent whenever Steve had most needed a male role model. But Steve hadn’t said any of this because his mother wouldn’t’ve understood.

“He expects you to be there on Friday,” his mother had said, “and he expects you to make a good impression.”

Steve’s stomach had clenched in response to her words. “Right. Good impression.”

“Yes, Steven. That means don’t talk about your job, those kids you ‘hang out’ with” – she’d said “hang out” with a sneer and a small sniff of disgust – “or your lack of college prospects. All your father’s colleagues think you’re taking a gap year.”

“Uh huh,” Steve had said, drawing the word out slowly, trying to force all the unfairness he felt into it. “So, basically, I can’t talk about my entire life. What should I talk about, then, mom? The weather? Because there’s only so much I can say about the fucking–”

“Do not swear – Harringtons are above such base language.”

Steve had let out another angry sigh and stared at his mother, waiting to see if she’d actually have any suggestions.

“We’ll talk about this later,” she’d said and had gone back to unpacking.

Steve had waited for another minute to see if she’d say anything else, but she hadn’t even looked at him.

That night, even though there were other people in the house, Steve slept worse than usual.

Steve is alone. It’s dark. He can’t move. He tries to stand, but he realizes he’s tied to a chair. Above him, a light flickers on, illuminating the large, empty room in an eerie fluorescent glow. Steve blinks, trying to adjust to the brightness. He looks down and sees that he’s wearing his Scoops uniform- it’s covered in dried blood and the Mind Flayer’s black essence – the uniform looks just like it did before he and Robin had set them on fire in his backyard firepit. Steve swallows and feels his heartrate speed up. He hears footsteps – the sound of heavy boots and the clicking of heels echoing on tiled floor. The door is pulled open, screeching as unoiled metal rubs together, and the Soviet soldier slowly steps in. His face is a careful mask, but Steve can see malice and triumph in his eyes. Steve’s mother steps out from behind the soldier, dressed to the nines, high heels clacking. Steve’s father and Billy enter the room one after the other. All of them

walk over and stand in a semi-circle around Steve as if they are trying to stare him down.

“What,” Steve squeaks out. He clears his throat and tries again, “What’s going on?”

No one responds – they just continue to stare at him.

Steve looks from the Russian’s face to the cold, but beautiful, face of his mother to the apathetic and bored face of his father and, finally, to Billy’s blank face.

“Billy,” Steve whispers, fear making his voice high, “Billy, please, help me.”

Billy doesn’t say anything – his expression shifts for an instant into something that looks like anguish and despair, but then it’s gone, and Billy’s face is as blank as it was before, black flooding into the blue of his eyes.

Steve swallows, “Mom?” he says, hesitantly, his voice cracking like he’s a little kid.

“You see,” his mother says, looking first at the soldier and then at Billy, as she crosses her arms over her chest, “he’s defective. You have to do something about it.”

“Mom,” Steve whispers, voice pleading, “what–” There’s something coming. Steve can just hear a series of bangs and thuds echoing down the hallway outside the room.

“I see,” replies the soldier –completely ignoring Steve – his words, warped by a heavy Russian accent, are deep and guttural. The soldier nods to Billy.

Billy walks forward and drops into a crouch in front Steve.

Over Billy’s shoulder, Steve can see his father looking from the door to his watch – a big silver one he’d gotten for twenty-five years with the company – “They say I do the work of five men,” he’d boomed at the party he’d thrown for himself. Steve had to physically bite his tongue to stop himself from saying, “That’s because you’re never fucking home.” –

back to the door.

Billy puts his hands on Steve's bare thighs and a small zing of fear – arousal – passes through him as Billy's blunt fingers dig into Steve's muscles.

The noises from the hall are getting louder. Steve knows what's coming and fear washes over him. He looks from the door back to Billy's face. "Billy, help me," he chokes out.

"Don't be afraid," Billy says, his blue eyes entirely drowned out by the black, veins in his arms turning black. "It'll all be over soon. Just try to hold still."

Steve's parents, the soldier, and, finally, Billy move to the side of the room. The Mind Flayer fights to force itself through the doorway, eventually bending the frame and oozing in. It slowly stalks towards Steve – he can smell the stench of chemicals, bile, and death coming off the monster in waves. Steve tries to wrench his arms free, but they're securely tied behind him. He tries to wriggle his legs free, but the tape won't budge from around his ankles. He feels a scream working its way up from his gut. The Mind Flayer steps in front of him and Steve–

–screamed himself awake. He jerked up and flung his hands over his mouth to try to muffle the sound. It was too late – Steve heard footsteps coming down the hall and then his door was thrown open. Steve's father appeared in the doorway, a handgun held pointing at the ground. He surveyed Steve's room, and seeing that it was empty, flicked the safety on.

"Steven," he barked out, "what is wrong with you? Your mother and I are trying to sleep."

Steve took a deep breath and muttered, "Sorry. Bad dream."

Steve's father snorted. "Make sure it doesn't happen again." Then he stalked back down the hallway.

*"Sure thing, dad," Steve said, rolling his eyes, as he got up and closed the door. "I'll get right on that. It's not like I *want* to have nightmares*

or anything.” Steve sat on the edge of the bed and took a few more shaky breaths. He leaned over and pulled his bat out from under the bed and rested it across his knees – Steve had cleaned it at the end of July, but the wood remained dark and blotchy where blood and black monster goo had soaked in.

If Steve had been alone in the house, he would have gone around turning on all the lights and checking each room to make sure it was empty. Then he would have settled on the couch with some of his father’s purloined alcohol – scotch or tequila or even vodka – and sipped (or shot) it as he stared blankly at the TV. At some point, Steve would feel his eyelids get heavy and, sometimes, he’d stay there on the couch, head tipped back and bat across his knees. Sometimes, he’d go back up to his bed, prop his bat up against the bed so he could reach out and grab it, and drift off to some sort of restless sleep. But, in either case, he would actually get a bit more sleep and then could start the day feeling more like a human being and less like a reanimated blob.

But Steve wasn’t alone in the house. He couldn’t assuage his fear. Instead, he had spent the rest of the night in a half-sleep state that he’d jerk himself awake from every time he’d started to dream. So, when Steve got out bed in the morning, he’d felt nauseated because he was just so *tired*.

Steve had spent the morning and most of the afternoon avoiding his parents. It was easy to avoid his father – he’d spent all day locked in his office. Every time Steve wandered passed the closed door, he could hear his dad yelling at someone on the phone, his loud, deep voice carried unintelligible words through the door. It was not quite as easy for Steve to avoid his mother. She kept bursting into his room to ask for his opinions on stuff for the party – roast beef or duck? Thoughts on a cheeseboard? Should they have Christmas music or classical? – and it just made Steve even more tired because he just *did not care*. He wondered if she was feeling guilty about their conversation yesterday, but then decided that it really didn’t matter.

Finally, he’d had enough of his mother’s questions and his father’s yelling – they played havoc with his roiling thoughts. So, Steve had

escaped his house with a quick kiss on his mother's cheek and a, "I gotta pick up Dustin – sorry, be back later." This was a complete lie – Dustin was at Mike's.

Steve drove around and wondered, not for the first time and most definitely not the last, why he didn't have more friends his own age. Because, he thought, they'd all gone to college and left him behind.

So, Steve went to the place where he knew he'd always be welcome – or at least until the nurses kicked him out – Billy's hospital room. He wandered in with a cup of bitter coffee in one hand and his copy of *The Shining* in the other. Steve settled in his usual chair, took a sip of coffee, and thought back to the conversation he and El had over a month ago.

Steve had stopped by to visit – with a coffee and his book (much like today) – and had found El sitting, cross-legged, on the end of Billy's bed. Her hair had grown out a bit since the last time he'd seen her, and she was wearing a bright, multi-coloured shirt. She'd had her eyes closed and a small grin was touching the corners of her mouth.

"El, "Steve had said, surprised, "what are you doing here?"

"Talking to Billy."

Steve had settled into the chair closest to the top of Billy's bed. "Is he answering?"

"Steve."

"El."

"He's sleeping," she'd said, looking at him. "He can't talk."

Steve had nodded and looked at Billy's face. "Hey, his eyes are moving. Is he dreaming?"

"I don't know."

"Well, can you... you know, check?"

"I'm not supposed to."

"El, please? It's been four months."

El had put a hand over her eyes and said, "Okay. Be quiet."

"Okay."

After a few minutes had passed, El said, "He's dreaming about the beach. His mom. The waves. He's happy."

"Good," Steve had breathed out, feeling that knot in his stomach loosen by a fraction of an inch.

"He can hear us. Sort of." El had added, running the back of her hand under her nose to wipe off the blood that had trickled out.

"Sort of?"

"Like coming in and out, like getting a bad signal on the radio?"

"Ah."

"Keep talking, Steve," El had said, while gathering her things. "He likes your voice."

"Oh." Steve hadn't known how to respond to that. "Ah." He'd paused again. Finally, he'd said, quietly, "I didn't think he liked me that much."

"No." El had shaken her head slightly. "He likes you."

"Oh?"

"He was thinking about you at the mall. He was afraid. You made him less afraid."

"Huh."

"Yes. Talk to him," El had said as she left Billy's room.

And Steve had been left alone wondering when Billy had started liking him and why he hadn't said anything to Steve. And if Billy

would be able to ever say anything to him.

“Billy, amigo, I hope you keep having good dreams,” Steve had said when he sat back down again.

Now, after a month and half, Steve was still not sure how he’d made Billy less afraid or if Billy actually liked him. Steve had been under the impression that the only feelings Billy had towards him were, at best, a combination of apathy and dislike or, at worst, hate and disgust. But apparently Billy did like him *and* liked his voice. Or, at least he did according to El. Maybe she had misunderstood? Maybe she had misunderstood, and Billy didn’t like him at all. Steve hoped that wasn’t the case because he actually liked Billy.

Or, at least, he liked the version of Billy he’d created in his head. This Billy was built from the information Steve had gleaned from Hop and Doc Owens about Billy’s abuse, the information he’d gotten from Max about how Billy had been in California, and Steve’s own projections about Billy (mainly based on the fact that Billy liked poetry). Steve’s version of Billy was still a fucking asshole, but that was because he was hurting from Neil’s violence and words. Steve’s version of Billy was sarcastic and brash and full of energy – much like Billy had been when Steve had first met him – but he’d stopped directing anger and hate towards the kids, towards Steve, towards himself. Steve’s version of Billy was aching to be understood – like every other angsty teen – to be heard, to be valued (much like Steve with his own parents).

Steve hoped, as he cracked open his book, that his version of Billy was similar to Billy when he wasn’t wearing his façade as armour.

“Was wondering when you’d show up.”

Steve opens his eyes. He’s lying on a towel on the beach. He can hear waves crashing in the distance. The sun is hot on his chest and face and it blinds him. Steve blinks once, twice, three times to adjust to the brightness. He turns his head and sees Billy lounging on his left, legs splayed out, knees bent, feet digging into the sand. Billy is wearing the red trunks he’d

worn as a lifeguard, aviators, and a dimmer version of his usual smirk. Billy sits up and props his elbows on his knees. He looks at Steve, with one eyebrow raised, expectantly.

"You were waiting for me?" Steve asks, bringing a hand to shield his eyes.

"Yeah, pretty boy, been waiting awhile."

"Sorry," Steve says, as he sits up and brushes sand from the backs of his arms.

Billy lets out a little laugh. "Don't worry 'bout it." He turns his head so he's looking the blue expanse of the ocean stretching towards the horizon. He adds, almost as an afterthought, "I got time."

"How much time?" Steve asks, turning towards Billy.

"Months and months," Billy mutters, his lips turn down. "Maybe years."

Steve reaches out a hand, puts it on Billy's shoulder, and squeezes in what he hopes is a comforting gesture. Billy looks back at him, mouth back in the small smirk.

"What, you worried about me?" Billy asks, peering over his sunglasses.

"Always." The word is out before Steve can think about it and he realizes, with a twisting feeling in his stomach, that it's completely true.

"I'll be here awhile, amigo," Billy says, as he leans back on his elbows and sticks his legs out, the tendons in his feet tensing as he stretches. The sunlight makes the hair glint golden on Billy's legs. Steve can't look away. His gaze moves from the tops of Billy's feet to the muscles of Billy's thighs to Billy's bare chest, gleaming with sweat, to Billy's face, still hidden by his sunglasses. Steve doesn't think he's ever seen Billy look this relaxed.

"You gotta go now," Billy says, pulling his aviators off to look Steve in the eyes. Steve feels like he's tipping forward, being pulled into the blue of Billy's eyes. He's falling into them.

Steve felt a hard poke to his shoulder and heard someone's throat

being cleared in impatience. He opened his eyes and saw Nurse Ratched's twin standing in front of him.

"Uh," Steve mumbled. He shifted in his chair and rolled his neck to get out the burgeoning kink. "Sorry, musta drifted off."

"You need to leave," the terrifying nurse said, leaning forward into Steve's space. A nametag was pinned to the top of her left pocket and Steve finally learned that her last name was Flagg.

"Right, yeah," said Steve, standing, and swaying a bit as the blood rushed from his head. Nurse Flagg had already left Billy's room, but she stared at Steve from the hallway, waiting for him to follow. Steve drank the rest of his now ice-cold coffee in one long gulp and leaned over to get closer to Billy's head. He could see Billy's eyes moving as if Billy was dreaming. Steve hoped that Billy was dreaming of the beach and his mom. He hoped Billy was having good dreams and not the nightmares that Steve had been plagued with.

"See ya next time, Billy," Steve whispered, "save me a seat."

So, the first time Steve slept with Billy, it was in the purely platonic sense of the word – two bodies sharing the same room, breathing the same air, while totally surrendering to utter exhaustion. And Steve, disoriented, half-awake, stumbled from Billy's room, wondering if they would ever be able to lie on a beach together. He wondered if Billy would ever *want* to lie on a beach with Steve. Steve thought about Billy's relaxed posture, the small grin that had played across Billy's lips, and the firmness of Billy's shoulder under his grip, and hoped, again, that his version of Billy was like the real Billy.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you all for reading! I appreciate all the comments and kudos!

6. I think I'm coming undone

Notes for the Chapter:

Hi everyone!

I don't think there are any additional warnings. The rating for this story might change soon, but so far, I think it still falls under mature.

I'm trying to get through some writer's block, so I don't think this chapter is the best one, but it sure is long.

The first time that Steve Harrington admitted to himself that he maybe liked Billy Hargrove as more than a friend – what was he, twelve? – it was a Monday. It was May 5th and he'd been cycling though El's words for almost twelve hours. Granted, those hours had started running together due to the excessive amount of beer Steve had drunk, but he couldn't stop hearing El say, "It's what got him to hold on, in the mall. He wanted to live to see you. He loves you."

He loves you. He loves you. He loves you.

He. Loves. You.

Those words were circling around in Steve's brain, getting louder no matter the amount of alcohol that he consumed. Billy loves him? Present tense? Or past tense? Billy loved him? What did that even mean? Was Billy *in love* with him? Or did Billy love him like someone loved a friend? Steve was pretty sure Billy had never treated him like a friend, so did that mean that Billy was in love with him?

Did Steve want him to be?

Maybe.

(Maybe yes.)

If Steve was being honest with himself, which he tried not to do too often, he was pretty sure he'd been "crushing" – fuck, he hated that

word, it sounded so juvenile – on Billy for a couple of months, since at least March, when he'd really started talking to Billy about his life.

(Or, at least, Steve had been crushing on the version of Billy that lived in his head.)

It was halfway through March and world had turned into a muddy mess that squelched with every step, indicating that spring was on its way. Albeit slowly. Steve slumped into his usual chair near Billy's head. He'd been visiting Billy for months but usually the kids were there to provide some sort of buffer. And now Steve was on his own, brain filled with questions that he'd been holding onto since his talk with El in November of the previous year. El had told him to talk to Billy and Steve was sure she hadn't been telling him to talk about something as mundane as the weather. But every time Steve had tried to say something, his mouth went dry, he couldn't make enough saliva to swallow let alone form words. Steve was not a talker – at least not about *deep* subjects – his goal in life was – had been – to make people laugh so they didn't look too deep and see all the layers and nuances that Steve was missing.

(He blamed his parents for this. They'd never wanted to listen to him when he was growing up. All the things that Steve had liked or found interesting or wanted to share were shut down – his parents hadn't asked questions or even showed any signs that they were listening to him. Steve had learned at a very young age to not share what he liked with his parents because he knew they wouldn't care. It had gotten to the point where Steve didn't even *know* what he liked anymore.)

But Steve couldn't make Billy laugh, he couldn't play off his audience, and he didn't know what to do about it. So, whenever he'd come in lately to visit Billy, he'd brought one of the kids or a book as a buffer. (Ha, who needed a buffer between themselves and someone in a fucking *coma*? Steve, apparently, that's who.) He just didn't know what to say to Billy that didn't make him sound like a complete idiot.

But, on this night, Steve was alone and very fucking tired. So, the

words came tumbling out, forced up by the knot in his stomach, passed the lump in his throat that never quite went away, through his dry mouth, and out into the silence of Billy's room.

"So... El said you liked the sound of my voice. Uh. But like, not too sure what to talk about." Steve paused, drummed his fingers against his knee, and wetted his lips.

"Ummm..." he dragged out the word. A sharp spike of anger pierced through his stomach and he thought of Tommy. He could tell Billy this – he needed to get it off his chest.

"Right," Steve said, voice a little shaky with the adrenaline coursing through him – adrenaline caused by anger, yes, but also by the fear of actually opening up to someone, even if that someone was asleep and probably wouldn't remember this conversation anyway. Well, Steve thought, got to start somewhere.

"Tommy is still a fucking dick." He looked at Billy's serene and calm face, so unlike the boisterous animated one that Steve *still* pictured when he thought of him. Steve let out a little laugh and added, "I'm surprised you didn't beat him up last year. I was kinda hoping you would – like take him down a few pegs." Steve didn't know how Billy had had the patience to deal with Tommy's stupid antics.

"He came into the video store today – god," Steve shuddered, "can't believe I'm still working there, it's been like eight months – and he's got Carol wrapped all around him. Guess they're home for spring break or something – and he's all like, 'You're such a loser, Harrington. Bet your daddy's real fucking proud, only son working at some dinky hole-in-the-wall video store' – and I wanted to hit him." Steve felt the ghost of rage racing through him and remembered the last time he'd felt that angry with another human being (he'd felt it plenty of times for monsters). "It was like that time in November." Steve remembered the fury he'd felt when he'd seen Billy holding Lucas up against the wall, the satisfaction of getting in a few good hits, and all the pain that followed. He touched the small scar near his temple where a plate had been smashed over his head and thought how it barely felt any different from the skin around it. Steve swallowed and, in a low sad voice, said, "Wow, it's been more than a year since then."

Steve sat in silence and played with the zippers on his coat. Finally, he said, "Hey, I think I've talked to you now more than I did when you were awake, ha, the irony. Is it irony?" Billy would think he was so stupid if he could hear him now. Steve had heard from Nancy that Billy was *"brilliant in English, never looked like he was paying attention, but when he was called on, he just knew the answer"* and here Steve was, not knowing the definition of irony and regretting using it in a sentence in the first place. "Fuck, could never remember the meaning of that." Steve stilled his hands – *don't fidget Steven, it's unbecoming for a Harrington* – and took some deep breaths. He wished it wasn't this hard for him to talk to people.

"Anyways," Steve continued, remembering he was telling Billy about Tommy, "I just wanted to wail on him. Y'know, like just let loose. Because, let's face it, he's not wrong. My dad can't even look at me anymore. Guess you know a thing or two about that." Fuck, how did that slip out? Steve was an asshole. "Sorry, not cool." He thought of Neil, and the anger that had been simmering under the surface towards Tommy and towards his own dad flared up – Neil deserved all of that anger. What Neil had done to Billy was so much worse than whatever Tommy or Steve's dad had done to Steve. "They still haven't found him – Neil – he skipped town shortly after you ended up in here. Probably worried about all the evidence Hop'd find on your x-rays." Steve stood up to look at Billy. Billy was sleeping, not really, Steve knew this, but it looked like Billy was sleeping. He looked innocent and weak. He looked pale and defenseless. He looked like he needed protecting. He looked...

Steve swallowed, forced down the rage, twisted it into the knot of regret that lingered in his stomach. "Jesus," he whispered. "Billy, do you know how many fractures you have – had? – they're healed." Steve let his gaze skim down Billy's form, covered by blankets. His eyes lingered on Billy's torso, picturing fractured ribs, broken arms, crooked fingers that hadn't been set properly. All hidden, covered by this blanket, covered by that thin layer of skin and muscle, covered by Billy's bravado, so that no one would look too closely and see the added layers and nuances that Billy had needed just to survive. Steve brought his gaze back up to Billy's face, absently brushed a stray hair off his forehead, and said, "but still, how aren't you in pain all the time?" Maybe he was and he'd just learned to hide it like everything

else.

"You're back."

"What can I say," Steve says, opening his eyes to see Billy leaning over him, backlit from the sun, making it hard for Steve to read his facial expression. "You're hard to stay away from." The waves sound the same as they did the last time he was here, rhythmic lapping lulling him into a half-sleep state.

Billy lets out a little snort, "What, my magnetic personality just pulled you here?"

"Yep." Steve runs his hands over the hot sand, and sees the grains shift and sparkle in the afternoon light.

"That's all you're gonna give me, pretty boy, just 'yep'?"

"Mhmm," Steve replies, as he closes his eyes. "You're blocking my sun."

"I'm not the only thing that's gonna be blocking your sun soon," Billy says, shifting away from Steve and back onto his own towel.

Steve feels the heat return to his face as Billy moves away. For a second, Steve wants to call him back, wants to say he'd rather have Billy near him than that heat of the sun. But he doesn't say anything, just feels the warmth that is now coupled with a slight pick up in the wind. It's cool and dries Steve's sweat. It leaves him cold and covered with goosebumps. Steve sits up and looks at the sky in the distance. He sees black clouds rolling in. He sees flashes of lightning illuminate the clouds red and purple. Steve is fairly certain clouds aren't supposed to be that colour.

Billy puts a cigarette in his mouth, lights it, inhales, blows out the smoke, passes it to Steve, and says, "Storm's coming in."

Steve takes the cigarette hyperaware that it was just in Billy's mouth, just touching Billy's lips. He inhales slowly and relishes the indirect closeness. Steeling his nerves, Steve passes it back to Billy. Billy takes it like it is no

big deal that two guys are sharing a cigarette.

"We should probably get going," Steve says, "don't wanna get caught in it."

"You head out."

"C'mon," Steve says, standing and reaching his hand out to Billy, trying to get him to stand up too. "It looks pretty bad." Glancing over his shoulder, Steve sees the clouds have blocked out the sun. The wind is almost howling, whipping sand up into little eddies that strike at Steve's face and chest.

Billy just takes another drag on the cigarette. "Can't," he says, sorrowfully, his blue eyes finally meeting Steve's.

All Steve can see is fear. "Billy," Steve says, as he bends down and grabs Billy's arm, trying to jerk him up. "Billy, c'mon. You gotta help me out here."

But Billy doesn't move. And Steve can't move him. Steve's hand keeps slipping off Billy's arm, and when he finally is able to keep his grip, he can't shift Billy at all. The wind is rushing by Steve's face and he has to squint his eyes to see Billy's form beneath him. Thunder cracks right over his head making Steve jump, and lightning illuminates something in the sky – a large foreboding shape that Steve is sure is the Mind Flayer.

"Billy," Steve yells, trying to make himself heard over the gale. "We gotta get outta here." He gives Billy's arm another yank, but his fingers lose their hold, he stumbles back, and falls onto his ass. Lightning forks across the sky and Steve can finally see that Billy has. Billy has...

Billy has turned to stone.

"Billy," Steve whispers, he can't even hear himself over the din. He reaches out and touches Billy's shoulder with his index finger, a gentle caress. Billy's shoulder crumbles, flakes into dust, and is whipped away by the wind. The rest of Billy follows, crumbling into itself and disappearing as if Billy had never existed.

Billy has turned to dust.

“Billy!” Steve screams, scrambling backwards, he looks up and sees the Mind Flayer. It’s bearing down on him. Steve is trapped. Trapped trapped trapped. It’s coming. It’s here. Here. He’s going to–

–die. Steve launched himself out of his bed with that thought on his brain. *He’s going to die.* Crouching down on the carpet, he tried to slow his panicked breathing. He felt the rough weave beneath his knees and hands, he saw its drab grey colour illuminated from the streetlight through his window, he tried to anchor himself to these physical reminders that he was, in fact, not going to be eaten by the Mind Flayer. But adrenaline was still making his heart race and his breaths come in quick, ragged pants. Steve fumbled his arm behind him trying to feel for his bat. His fingers closed around the smooth handle and the tightening in his chest eased up enough for Steve to take a small sip of air. He knew he wouldn’t be able to fall asleep again tonight, even if he went around turning on lights and checking dark corners.

Steve closed his eyes and all he could see was Billy disintegrating, disappearing, like he’d never been there in the first place. All he could see was Billy’s sad, hopeless face as he told Steve to leave. All he could see was Billy’s open eyes and the grin that had spread across his face when he’d asked Steve if Steve had been drawn to him by his *animal magnetism*. And wasn’t that the case? Billy’s animal magnetism drew everyone to him. Billy’s quick movements, cutting remarks, overtly sexual – sexual? Where had that come from? – expressions had drawn everyone’s gazes. Steve shuddered slightly. Yes, if there was one thing that defined Billy’s loud brashness, it was his animal magnetism.

But now? Now that animal magnetism was dormant, and Steve was *still drawn* to Billy.

“Hey, amigo,” Steve said, as he strolled into Billy’s room, backpack slung over one shoulder, hands shoved into his pockets. He plopped

down in his usual seat, savoring the silence. It was after nine on a Friday night and he'd just gotten off his shift. The store had been packed with screaming kids, running around liked they'd been hopped up on cocaine instead of just sugar. And Steve, who was used to hanging out with rambunctious teens, was utterly, fucking exhausted. He plunked the backpack on the floor, a tinny clang rang out, and Steve surreptitiously looked around. Or, at least, he tried to. Underhandedness was not Steve's strong suit. When he confirmed that no one was around, he pulled a can from the bag, and opened it.

"Brought you a beer," Steve whispered, and then took a long pull. "Nah, just kidding, it's for me." He sat back and let a small grin spread across his face.

"Don't tell the nurses though, they're scary. Man, have you seen that one with that fucking stare – just needs some victory rolls then she'd be the spitting image of Nurse Ratched." Steve's brain flashed onto the nametag – *Nurse Flagg* – but it was too late, she was forever cemented in his head as the psychotic nurse from *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. He shuddered as he thought of that movie – he was not a fan. "Don't do anything that'll get you on her bad side." Steve remembered the cold look she'd given him in December. She'd given him other looks since then, but that one had stuck in his brain. "Ha," he said, a little uneasily, eyes drawn to the open door. For a second, he'd been sure she was going to be standing there, arms crossed over her chest, glaring at him. She wasn't. Steve swallowed and added, "I'm more likely to get on her bad side than you – you're a model patient – never heard anyone complain about you. At least I can walk outta here if she starts giving me funny looks. Oh. Sorry, low blow."

Steve looked back at Billy's sleeping face and downed the rest of his beer. Gruffly, he said, "You gotta start fighting back here, man – people are gonna walk all over you." He thought of Billy's ever-moving face, his loudness, his contrariness, his smirk, and added, "Gotta keep up your reputation."

For some reason that he cannot fathom, Steve is expecting to be lying on a

beach.

He isn't.

He opens his eyes and sees that he's sprawled on a couch – very much like the one in Tina's basement. He can hear music coming from upstairs, looks down his torso, and sees the bottom of his black blazer. Right, he's at the Halloween party. He looks up to the right and sees that he's lying on someone's jean-clad thigh. He looks up to the left and sees a leather jacket, a bare, gleaming chest, and the ends of blond curls. Steve scrambles up and off Billy.

"Slow down, amigo, where's the fire?" Billy asks, left arm draped across the back of the couch, right hand bringing a cigarette to his mouth. He's got a smirk dancing across his face that doesn't leave his eyes when he inhales. He exhales out a cloud of smoke and licks his lips. The tip of the cigarette glows orange in the dim light when Billy inhales again.

"Uh..." Steve says, feeling stupid. He draws his legs in and stares at Billy from the other side of the couch.

Billy winks and passes Steve the cigarette. Steve takes it automatically, but fear fills his stomach – something bad had happened the last time they'd shared a cigarette. Something that Steve can't remember. Then the feeling passes, leaving Steve filled with a rush of giddiness, and he takes a drag on the cigarette.

"What," says Billy, "my leg not good enough for you, Harrington? Need something softer?"

"Uh..." Steve repeats, feeling even more stupid. Does Billy not know what he's saying?

Billy takes the cigarette back from Steve and pats his thigh.

"C'mon, pretty boy, lie back. Looks like you could use some rest."

"Uh..." Steve says for a third time. But Billy's thigh had been comfortable. Steve glances around and sees that the room is empty. He can still hear the low din coming from upstairs, but it seems so far away now. "You sure? Seems kinda..." Steve lets his words trail off as Billy pats his thigh again and takes another drag on his cigarette. "Yeah, okay," Steve

mumbles as he turns around on the couch and lies back onto Billy's leg. He can hear Billy let out a low chuckle from above.

"Didn't think you'd let me get this close again," Billy mutters, leaning over to meet Steve's gaze. "Was sure, after I beat the crap outta you, that you'd keep your distance."

"Huh?" Steve says, sleep starting to take him.

Billy gently runs his fingertips over Steve's forehead and pushes them through Steve's hair.

"Always wanted to do that," Billy says, sitting back and taking the final inhale from the cigarette. He stubs it out in the ashtray on the side table.

Steve can barely open his eyes. But he slurs out, "Felt good. Do it again."

"Sure, pretty boy, I can do that. You just gotta ask for what you want."

Steve drifts off, feeling Billy's blunt fingers running through his hair, occasionally dipping down to trace lines on his forehead. He hasn't felt this—

—safe. Steve rolled over and stared out the window. He still felt the ghost of fingers – Billy's fingers – smoothing the hair away from his face, dragging on his scalp, easing away some of the tension that had accumulated there for the past couple of years.

Safe.

Billy made him feel safe.

And that freaked Steve out, because safe was something he had never associated with Billy Hargrove.

Never.

But, apparently, Steve's brain had decided that Billy, with all his hidden layers, wanted to keep Steve safe. And, Steve thought, quietly, in hazy words that didn't solidify, he kind of wanted Billy to keep

him safe.

“Tommy came in again,” Steve spit out as he walked into Billy’s room a few days after he’d visited with his contraband beer. Anxiety and fury were battling under his skin. It was Tommy’s fault. He’d gotten under Steve’s skin and Steve didn’t know how to get rid of him.

“Dude,” Steve continued, after he’d sat down. “I don’t get it, I thought spring break was a fucking week – he’s been here almost two.” He let out a long sigh and tipped his head back, trying to regain some of his composure.

After a minute, Steve said, “He decided to try to stare me down, just leaned on the counter and like, looked at me.” Steve snorted. “Joke’s on him, I got lotsa practice staring people down – gotta be intimidating some way when you look as pretty as I do,” Steve flushed – why had that slipped out? It’s not like he could get compliments or reassurance from Billy. It’s not like Billy would give him compliments or reassurance “– ha, kidding – but like, still he decided a staring contest?” Steve pondered Tommy’s weird posturing from earlier, he had no clue what Tommy had been trying to do. Steve cleared his throat and said, “I dunno, really fucking weird. Then he just winked or something – maybe blinked? – and left. Like just sauntered out – good word, sauntered – Rob’s been reading for her SATs, tryna memorize all those fancy words, she tells me the good ones.”

Steve pictured Robin, rolling her eyes at him, as she’d read through the list of words that she’d been trying to memorize during their shift a few days ago. He let a little grin spread across his face. Robin was great – there was no bullshit or pretending with her. Steve could just be Steve. He didn’t have to try and impress her.

Steve jerked himself out of his reverie. “Apparently, they’re all good – it’s way too many words. Gotta try to keep my brain cells for the important shit, I got too few as it is – or at least that’s what my dad keeps saying.” Steve let a wave of sadness and anger flood through

him and it left him feeling flat and empty. He didn't understand why his dad had to say such hurtful things. "God, he's such a dick. Maybe him and Neil woulda got along? Probably just try to 'out-man' each other."

Steve looked over at Billy – Billy's face looked calm – and Steve remembered what it felt like to have Billy run his fingers through Steve's hair. Or, at least, he'd dreamt it and hoped that, if given the chance, it would feel just as soothing in real life. It made Steve ache. He was so selfish. Here he was, wanting Billy to comfort him when Billy was in a fucking coma. Shame flooded Steve and he got up to pace, as if the movement could leave some of the feeling behind.

When he got to the head of Billy's bed, Steve whispered, "At least my dad never fractured my ribs." He collapsed onto his forearms next to Billy's head and thought back to all the times he'd seen Billy – *naked* – in gym class or at practice. All the times Billy had his chest bared and all the times he *hadn't*. Steve wondered if Billy had been hiding bruises on those days. Steve wondered if the bruises Billy had let people see weren't just from practice. He sighed and said to the floor – he couldn't look at Billy's face – "Billy, I am sorry. I shoulda been paying more attention – you know, I did notice them – the bruises – but I just assumed you got into another fight, that you deserved it." Steve felt bile work its way up his throat, accompanying the words that just came spilling out. "I'm an asshole."

Steve wrenched himself away from Billy's bed and turned to the windows. "You didn't deserve any of this – not Neil, not the stupid Mind Flayer, not the Upside Down, not those government suits that keep tryna take pictures – I mean, c'mon, there are no more bruises or open wounds or any of that shit." He shot a look at Billy over his shoulder as if to confirm that the bruises and wounds were, in fact, healed.

"You're just sleeping now – healing, supposedly. But, man," Steve sighed, "it'd be nice if you woke up soon."

He dropped back into the chair and put his head in his hands. Steve whispered, "I'm starting to feel like a freak – my closest friends are a bunch of preteens – well, I guess teens, now, shit, they're in high school – a sarcastic lesbian – uh, I shouldn't've said that, don't tell

anyone, okay? – and a dude who’s in a coma – I mean, he’s a great listener though, but, like getting tired of hearing my own voice. Billy, man, just wake up.”

The din of a cheering crowd fills his ears and Steve opens his eyes. There isn’t a crowd. There isn’t anyone in the gym. The light is dim, making it hard for Steve to see any fine details. It doesn’t feel like a place that had just been filled with people. It feels empty. It feels lonely.

Footsteps echo from behind him and Steve jerks around. He can’t see anyone, but the footsteps are still coming towards him. Finally, he’s able to make out the end of a glowing cigarette and then Billy appears, almost as if he had stepped through a door.

“You waitin’ long?” Billy asks, flicking the cigarette onto the court. It bursts into a small fire and then fizzles out. In that flash of light, Steve sees that Billy looks different.

“Not long,” Steve whispers, wetting his lips. Fear has made his mouth dry, made his voice crack, made his arms break out in goosebumps.

Billy continues to move forward and stands in a shaft of light. He’s wearing basketball shorts and Converse and nothing else.

Steve sees the scars. He sees the white starburst on the left side of Billy’s chest. He sees the smaller punctures that go down Billy’s sides. Steve sees the scars, yes, but he also sees how thin Billy’s become, how pale, how hollow.

“What’s the matter?” Billy asks, lips drawn back in a cruel sneer, “I don’t do it for you anymore, pretty boy?” Billy spins slowly so that Steve can see the extent of the scars on Billy’s back. So that Steve can see how the bones of Billy’s spine stand out, shadows making them appear larger. Billy meets Steve’s eyes when he finishes his turn and he doesn’t drop them.

Steve can see fear in Billy’s eyes that mirrors his own. Steve can see they’re glistening with unshed tears. Steve can see pain. So, Steve does what he’d want anyone to do if he was in Billy’s shoes, he walks over to

him and wraps him up in a hug. At first Billy doesn't do anything, just stands stiffly in Steve's embrace. And Steve wonders if maybe after all the abuse, after all the pain, that Billy doesn't want to be touched. He's just about to pull back, when Billy exhales and drops his head to Steve's shoulder.

"They're just scars, Billy," Steve whispers into Billy's ear. "We've all got scars."

Billy doesn't say anything.

Steve runs his hands up Billy's back, fingertips catch on the scars, and the prominent bones of Billy's spine. "You're healing," Steve says, "but you gotta wake up soon."

Billy pulls back. "I am awake," he whispers.

"No," Steve shakes his head, hands going to Billy's shoulders, "you're not."

Billy looks down at himself as if he's taking in all of his body's changes. His eyes meet Steve's again, and Billy forces out through a clenched jaw, "Maybe I don't want to be." Then he spins on his heel and stalks off into the darkness.

"Billy," Steve calls out, and he runs after him.

But Billy is gone. And Steve is alone. He will always be—

—alone.

"Billy," Steve gasped out as he awoke. He had to wrench his arms free from the tangled sheets – clearly, he'd been moving a lot in his sleep – to bring his hands to his face. Steve rubbed his eyes and pushed his hair back. He tried to take a few deep breathes, but the knots in his stomach stopped his lungs from fully expanding. Billy's eyes, filled with pain and fear, kept showing up each time Steve closed his own.

Steve checked the clock – 3:15 in the morning – and debated just

driving to the hospital to see Billy. But tiredness dragged at his body, making his limbs sluggish and heavy. Sadness weighed down his brain as he thought of how pale – *weak* – Billy had looked. Billy, who had always been larger than life, had been reduced to skin and bones *and scars*.

The dreams got worse and Steve didn't know why. His parents hadn't come home, so he didn't have to face their expressions of disappointment or indifference. His job was going okay – well, as okay as working at a minimum wage paying job could be – at least there weren't any stupid slogans for him to memorize. Robin was her usual sarcastic self. Dustin was his usual exuberant self. Nancy and Jonathan were their usual subdued selves (at least around Steve). The other kids were their usual annoying selves. In short, everything was the same.

But the dreams persisted.

But the nightmares persisted.

(And Steve grew afraid to sleep.)

“Hey, amigo...” Steve said through a yawn as he sat down. “Look, I know you’ve had some really shitty luck in your life – Neil’s a fucking asshole,” Steve raised his index finger, “your mom’s dead,” Steve raised his middle finger, “you were almost killed by an interdimensional monster,” Steve raised his ring finger and then dropped his hand back into his lap with a long sigh, “– but, like, sometimes I envy you.”

Steve glanced at Billy; he could see that Billy's collarbones had become more prominent, sharper. “Not most of the time, mind you,”

Steve whispered, “but like sometimes, like now. Like, it’s what, three in the morning – ha, I’ve been here so often the nurses let me just wander in, even Nurse Ratched” – *Flagg*, Steve’s brain supplied – “she’s so fucking creepy, seriously.” Steve shuddered at the thought of her, “– and here you are, sleeping peacefully – not a care in the world – and I-I,” he stuttered, and then took a slow, deep breath, trying to calm himself, “well I had to leave all the lights on in my house. Had to bring that bat upstairs – you know, the one that almost took your balls off – had to steal some of my dad’s scotch – and, dude, he will definitely notice that when he gets back, another thing to add to the ‘why Steve is a piece of shit and not actually a Harrington’ list – just to get some sleep.”

Steve wetted his lips and let his head tip back, he was just so tired. “And I got an hour, maybe. I don’t know. I shouldn’t even have driven here – pretty sure I’m still drunk and so sleep-deprived the traffic lights started dancing – like traffic lights don’t normally do that, right? They stay put, change colours, you know, red, green, yellow, the usual colours, not blue and pink and purple? – and that’s really not safe.”

Steve closed his eyes and managed to slur out before drifting off, “If Hop’d found me, Billy, I’d be in fucking jail. I am so fucked. I just want to get some sleep.”

He’s lying on his bed, facing the window. The moon is full and bright – it casts shadows in his room. He feels someone shift behind him. They roll closer until they’re pressed against Steve’s back. An arm is flung across his middle and Steve can make out the shapes of Billy’s fingers and that silver ring in the moonlight. Steve feels Billy raise himself up on his elbow and lean over him. Billy’s mouth is next to his ear and Steve feels the ends of Billy’s curls brush against his cheek.

“You okay?” Billy whispers, lips brushing Steve’s ear as he talks. It makes goosebumps rise on Steve’s neck and sends shivers down his body.

“Can’t sleep,” Steve mutters.

Billy’s hand tightens across Steve’s stomach as he pulls Steve back against

him. "Just close your eyes," Billy says, "Sleep'll come."

Steve exhales slowly, basking in the solid warmth of Billy behind him. "I don't want to," Steve whispers. He flips over, cautiously, trying to keep Billy from moving away. Billy's hand stays on the small of his back and Steve can just barely make out Billy's grin in the dim light.

"Why don't you wanna sleep, baby?" Billy purrs, "afraid of the nightmares?"

Steve moves closer, tucking himself under Billy's chin. His nose brushes the hollow of Billy's throat and he can feel as Billy swallows. "No," Steve says, inhaling the scent of Billy's cologne and sweat.

"So then just sleep." Billy traces circles on Steve's back with his fingers. It's light and teasing.

"What if," Steve whispers, "what if I go to sleep and then you're gone when I wake up?"

"Pretty boy, I'm not goin' anywhere."

Steve shifts back to look Billy in the eyes. Billy's expression is soft – his eyes are half-lidded, and his mouth is turned up in a small smile.

"I'm not goin' anywhere," Billy repeats. His palm is hot on Steve's back as he pulls Steve back to him, and–

–Steve jerked his head up from its resting place on the wall. Billy's words were still ringing in his head. Billy's fingers were still on his back. Steve swallowed and realized that he was half hard. He looked around and shifted his dick, trying to relieve the pressure. He checked the clock and saw that he'd only been asleep for half an hour at most. Steve stood, stretched, and, once again, tried to adjust his dick in his pants.

"Right," Steve said, leaning over Billy's bed, seeing Billy's sleeping face, eyes moving like he's dreaming, "you don't ever go anywhere. It's me that's always leaving."

Steve took a few deep breaths – his dreams about Billy were getting increasingly confusing.

“Sorry, amigo, I don’t wanna leave you alone,” Steve whispered, “but I can’t stay here.”

“Billy – gotta a question for you,” Steve said, as he wandered into the room. It was evening; he had dropped Dustin off at the arcade and, like many evenings before, he’d ended up at the hospital. Anxious energy was rolling under Steve’s skin, making his stomach tie itself into knots. Steve swallowed the saliva that had pooled in his mouth. He hoped he wasn’t going to vomit.

“In your opinion, what’s worse – having a mom who loved you and is now dead and a father who beats the crap outta you or having two parents who literally do not give a shit about you? I mean, like on one hand, you knew love and now you know lotsa pain.” Steve dumped his bag on the floor and heard the cans ting as the bounced off each other. He cracked one open, took a swallow, and wondered if, maybe, his drinking was getting out of hand.

“But for me, well, I can’t remember the last time I got a hug.” He thought back, maybe at Christmas? Maybe the kids – teens – had hugged him? Maybe Nancy had? Steve couldn’t remember. He took another swallow, hoping his stomach would let the beer stay down. “My parents haven’t been home in like, I dunno, two months? But at least my dad doesn’t hit me – hate to break it to you, but my only fractures are from you, bro.” Steve touched the scar on his forehead that no longer felt like a scar, just skin. “Ugh. Sorry, I shouldn’t be talking at you while drinking – bad combo – leads to a Steve with no fucking filter, which, inevitably leads to a Steve stuck in some quarter-life crisis – which is impossible because I haven’t lived a quarter of my life – at least I hope I haven’t, man, that would suck.”

Steve finished his beer in three gulps and wondered if maybe his life was almost over. Maybe he’d long surpassed the point when his life was a quarter done. Maybe, like so many of the unlucky Hawkins’

residents, he was fast approaching the finish line. Steve's stomach plummeted with that thought but given the amount of fucked-up shit that went on in this town, he honestly could say that he wouldn't be surprised if he didn't make it past the next year or the year after. Unless he made it out of this town. Which was never going to happen – his grades weren't good enough to get into college and his father had stopped talking about Steve working for him – *you just don't have the drive, son* – so Steve was stuck here. Stuck in this place until it swallowed him whole.

Steve put the empty back in his bag and opened another. He was going to die. Probably soon.

“Dude, you don't know this, because, well, we never talked before and now you're in a fucking coma, but, remember Tina's party – the stupid Halloween one? You were dressed as the Terminator – man, I thought your costume was so cool until I realized it was pretty much what you wore everyday minus the shirt.” Steve could vividly picture Billy with his bare chest covered in beer and his smirk as Tommy had told Steve that Hawkins had a new king. “You looked like you had no fucking cares in the world – like all you needed to worry about was stealing my title.” Steve's fingers clenched around the can making it crinkle, the sound ringing loud in the quiet hospital. He took a deep breath and relaxed his grip. “And there I was, dealing with the Hollands, the Upside Down, Nancy pulling away from me – apparently, I'm bullshit – my whole world had gotten way too big – way too complicated. I was so jealous that you had things so easy – I didn't know if I wanted to punch you or be you or just, I dunno, try to spread some of my pain around so I didn't have to hold it all. Shitty of me, I know. Especially now I know about all the shit you were dealing with.”

Steve finished off his second beer and threw the empty into his bag to join the other one. “I'm sorry, really sorry, Billy.” He stood up, swayed a little as the alcohol hit, grabbed his bag, and left.

Steve wondered, as he got back into his car, if Billy was also rapidly approaching the finish line. He wondered if Billy had actually already reached it, crossed it, and everything just needed to catch up.

It's dark in Steve's room but the moon lights up strips along the floor. Steve leans back on his bed, goosebumps forming on his bare chest and thighs. He can't remember how he got here. He can't remember when he lost his clothes. Billy's standing in front of him, partially illuminated by the moon, highlighting the smirk, his bare chest, and his curls. He steps forward and strips off one black fingerless glove from one hand, dropping it casually on the floor. He removes the other and leans over Steve, placing his hands on either side of Steve's hips.

"You sure you wanna do this?" Billy whispers, as he bends forward and places a soft kiss on Steve's neck, just below his jawbone.

"Uh huh," Steve says, as his eyes flicker closed, and he tips his head to the side to give Billy more access to his neck. "You want to?"

Billy lets out a little laugh and drags his tongue down Steve's neck to where it meets his shoulder. Then Billy gives Steve's neck a small bite that he soothes with his tongue. "Pretty boy," he says, "I've been wanting to do this since the first time I saw you at that stupid party."

"Oh?" Steve gasps out. He cautiously runs the tips of his fingers over Billy's pec, relishing the shudder that goes through him as Steve's fingers catch on his nipple.

"Yeah, when you looked at me over those stupid sunglasses, I wanted to push you against that wall. I wanted to make you see me."

Steve flattens his palm and pushes against Billy's chest. He ducks his head back so he can look Billy in the eyes. "I see you, Billy." He strokes his thumb up on down over the heated skin, feeling Billy's strong heartbeat echoing through his hand.

"You like what you see?" Billy asks, dropping into a crouch in front of Steve. He won't meet Steve's eyes; he looks down and away.

Steve puts his index and middle fingers under Billy's chin and Billy lets Steve tilt his head so they can meet each other's eyes. "Yes," breathes Steve, trying to put all his feelings of trust, wanting, longing, hope, into that one word.

Billy smiles, it's soft and shy and a little guarded, then wraps his hand around the back of Steve's neck and pulls him in for a kiss. It's soft and shy and a little guarded and Steve reads the feelings of trust, wanting, longing, hope in it.

Steve puts both his hands on Billy's face and pulls him in deeper. He feels Billy's lips, slightly chapped, open and Steve gently traces the opening with his tongue. Billy's tongue glides over his own, the wet heat is intoxicating. Steve leans forward, chasing it, and—

—Steve gasped awake, feeling the ghost of Billy's lips on his own, feeling the hard muscles and planes of Billy's chest under his fingers, feeling the ever-present hard-on that's been plaguing him since these dreams about Billy had become infinitely more confusing rub against his stomach.

Arousal and confusion writhed through the knot of regret in Steve's gut. He didn't want to think about that right now. He could force his feelings down. He could deal with them later.

It wasn't like Steve hadn't had practice with compartmentalizing all the bullshit in his life. Shove it down. Deal with it later.

(Or, maybe, deal with it never.)

Steve closed his eyes and could still see the shy, guarded smile that Billy gave him. Steve closed his eyes and could still see the shudder that ran through Billy when he'd touched his chest. Steve closed his eyes and could still see the way Billy had looked at him before asking if Steve still wanted to do this, his eyes blown and mouth open, lips wet.

Steve closed his eyes and felt his body responding.

Steve opened his eyes, trying to contain that response, tamp it down, force it under. That dream had been days ago, and Steve could still see the details vividly. The May sun blinded him as he sat in his car outside the hospital. Steve wasn't sure if he should even go see Billy.

He didn't know if it would be creepy or weird to talk to him all the while knowing that Steve's dreams about him were evolving into something more explicit. Something bordering on sexual. Nope, they were actually sexual. Steve was having wet dreams about Billy. He didn't know what was worse, having those kind of dreams about a boy or having those kind of dreams about someone he didn't actually know – given Billy had been in a coma for most of their friendship (could he even call their relationship a friendship, it was a one-sided monologue) – or having those kind of dreams about someone who had beaten the crap out of him.

Steve pictured Billy – Billy as he used to be, full of cocky swagger, half-lidded eyes, and that smirking mouth. Steve thought about kissing him like they'd kissed in the dream. That thought definitely did not revolt him. Steve thought about kissing Nancy – her soft lips, soft smile, soft demeanor – and, yeah, those kisses (and more) still hit him with the ghost of lust (albeit muted because he liked Nancy as a friend and knew she was happy with Jonathan). Steve thought of Billy lying bare beneath him or looming over him and his cock twitched with interest.

Steve admitted to himself, while getting out of his car, that, perhaps, he might be attracted to Billy. In a purely physical manner. On that baser level.

Steve's feet carried him to Billy's room as his brain tried to process what that meant. He should maybe talk to Robin. Maybe. But maybe giving what he was feeling a voice would make it real. And Steve wasn't sure if he could deal with that. Especially because he didn't know if Billy was going to wake up. And if he didn't, that would make this whole issue moot.

Steve reached Billy's room and saw someone sitting on the end of his bed.

"I know what it's like. I had a bad papa. He hurt me. You'll be okay – I'll protect you from yours."

"El?" Steve said, as he opened the door, all thoughts of Billy – *naked, gleaming chest, smirking, running his tongue over his top lip* – left his head when he saw her.

“Hi Steve,” El said, glancing over her shoulder at him.

“He talking yet?” Steve asked, trying hard to guard his thoughts. He didn’t want her to pick up on his confusion and he definitely did not want her to see the images that were threatening to overwhelm him.

“He talks to me.”

“Really?” Steve sat in the chair near Billy’s head, and crossed his arms over his chest, as if he were trying to keep himself contained within his own skin.

“Yes,” El nodded, “He’s still far away though.”

“Far away, what do you mean by that?”

“He’s healing. It’s hard. He has to go deep below the surface.”

“Um. Okay. Sure. That totally makes sense.” It didn’t really make that much sense to Steve. Billy had been healing for ten months, how much more healing did he need?

“Steve,” El admonished, “he’ll wake when he’s ready.”

“But when will that be?” Steve asked, “It’s been almost ten months – the doctors are worried that he’s not making progress, or something.” Steve didn’t want the doctors to decide Billy was a lost cause. What would that even mean?

“Soon. He’s just bringing himself back together.”

“El. When is soon?”

“Soon.”

“That’s fucking bullshit,” Steve snapped. “Fuck – sorry, shouldn’t’ve sworn.” He took a few slow, deep breaths. His nerves were coiled tight and he knew part – most – of that was because he was confused about what he was feeling.

“Steve,” El said, as she hopped off the bed and sat in the chair next to Steve, “he will wake up. Keep talking to him. He likes your voice.”

Steve slumped down in the chair, trying to let the tension leave his body. “You said that. How do you know?”

“It’s what got him to hold on, in the mall. He wanted to live to see you. He loves you.”

“Wait – what?” Steve sat up and looked at El’s face to see if he could understand what she was saying.

El met his eyes calmly, guilelessly. “Yes. Like Mike loves me or Lucas loves Max.”

“Wait – Mike loves you and Lucas loves Max?” Weren’t they just kids? They were too young to be *in love*. They didn’t even know what love was. Did they?

“Duh.”

“Are you lying?” Steve’s eyes traced her face trying to see if she was messing with him, if she’d somehow seen the thoughts racing through his brain about what he was feeling for Billy. But that seemed cruel and El had never struck him as cruel.

El shook her head vehemently. “Friends don’t lie, Steve.”

“El, c’mon. You can’t just say shit like that. Billy doesn’t love me – he’s a dude.” He’s in a coma. He hates me. There were so many reasons why Billy couldn’t love him.

“Does that matter?” El asked, expression conveying genuine confusion.

“I mean, like, kinda? I dunno. It can be dangerous for that to be common knowledge.” Especially if Neil decided to come back. With all the shit Neil had done to Billy, he’d probably kill Billy if he knew that Billy liked guys.

Wait. Was that why Neil had done the things he’d done to Billy? Had Neil been punishing Billy for who he’d loved? Had Neil been punishing Billy for something out of Billy’s control? Anger pierced Steve in the chest, he was going to kill Neil if Neil ever came back to Hawkins.

“But Robin loves girls,” said El, bringing Steve out of his reverie.

“Jesus!” Steve yelled. He took a breath and in a lower voice, asked “Did she tell you that or did you, you know, look?”

“Um.” El glanced down. Clearly, she’d looked into Robin’s head. Or, maybe, Robin wasn’t as subtle as she thought?

“El. That’s not stuff you should be sharing – it’s like,” Steve didn’t really know what it was, “private, or some shit.”

“But if it makes her happy or it makes Billy happy, why is it dangerous?”

Steve sighed and wasn’t that the crux of the issue. Robin was a good person and, well, Billy was an asshole, but maybe he would have been less of one if he hadn’t been worried about being killed for who he loved. They deserved to be happy. “I don’t know. Honestly. The world is a fucked-up place.”

El nodded gravely. “Worse than the Upside Down?”

Steve thought of the Mind Flayer, the Demodogs, the Demogorgons. Then he thought of Barb, who’d died alone and afraid. He thought of Brenner who had sent men to hunt down a little girl. He thought of the Soviet soldier who’d beaten his face in (and made the odd appearance in his dreams). Steve thought of all the people who’d had some hand in breaking the barriers between this world and the Upside Down. “Uh.” Steve swallowed. “Not worse, just different. People can be monsters too.” And monstrous people were usually so much worse than the actual monsters. But El didn’t need to know that.

“I know,” El said, quietly, “Papa was one.”

“Right.” Shit, had El picked up his thoughts about that asshole? “Please, El, don’t tell anyone else what you told me. Billy’s got enough to deal with when he wakes up, he doesn’t need a bunch of teens judging him.” He also doesn’t need any bigoted adults finding out. He definitely doesn’t need Neil finding out – confirming his suspicions? – and coming back to finish the job that the Mind Flayer

had started.

“They wouldn’t. But I won’t tell. But friends don’t lie.”

Steve sighed. Why was everything so complicated? “Can you, I dunno, just avoid the question?”

El shook her head. “Still lying, Steve.”

“Fuck.” Steve stood up, he had to get out of here. “Just be careful. That could get Billy killed if the wrong people find out.”

“If the monster-people find out?”

“Yeah.”

Steve rushed back to his car, breaths coming in quick gasps. He hadn’t wanted to think about this. He hadn’t wanted to deal with this right now. But the universe was conspiring against him.

Steve unlocked his car and fell into the driver’s seat. *He loves you.* He started the car, staring at the shadows created by the trees at the edge of the parking lot. *He loves you.* He reversed out of his stall, barely registering if anyone was behind him. *He loves you.*

He loves you.

Steve drove home in a daze. Billy’s face with its small smile and guarded eyes asking Steve if he liked what he saw coupled with *he loves you* repeating over and over in Steve’s head, until the only thing he could see was Billy and the only thing he heard was those words. They tied him up with uncertainty and with lust. They weighed him down with fear and want. They dragged him under with terror and hope.

Steve drank to bury the images and words, but they dug themselves up.

Steve thought about the admission to himself that he was attracted to Billy. He thought about how he’d made the caveat that it *was just physical*.

But he knew that there was nothing *just physical* about the way he felt about Billy. Billy had wormed his way under Steve's skin. Billy had worked his way into Steve's brain, his voice reverberating through Steve's thoughts, his face appearing every time Steve closed his eyes. Billy had inserted himself into Steve's life, his presence permeating through everything Steve did or thought. Steve thought, as he took another gulp of beer, that he was pretty sure he was already in love with Billy. Which was pretty fucked up, since he didn't even know Billy.

Notes for the Chapter:

As always, I appreciate any feedback - either here or on [tumblr](#) (which I am slowly getting better at).

Stay safe, everyone!

7. so stay the night

Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry for the delay in writing/posting this! I haven't been feeling super awesome about this story, but I'm hoping that'll come back soon. Thank you to everyone who I talked to about crushes and all the feelings associated with them!

As always, thank you to the wonderful [red_plaid_on_red_plaid](#) for beta-ing this. We are both suffering from extreme insomnia though, so apologies in advance for anything that was missed (it would've been missed by me).

The first time Billy Hargrove held Steve Harrington's hand it was a Wednesday. It was May 7th, Billy had just woken up from a coma, and Steve had just confessed that he hoped Billy might still love him. It sounds romantic.

It was.

Steve hadn't planned on confessing that – or, rather, he hadn't planned on Billy hearing that confession.

The rest of Monday passed in a blurry haze. Steve couldn't remember what he'd done – even while he was doing it. He thought he'd picked up Dustin from school (but only because he did that when he wasn't working) and had maybe dropped Dustin off at the arcade. Maybe. Probably? Steve really didn't know. Because all of a sudden it was dark out. And all that Steve was certain about was that he'd spent the whole day thinking of Billy. That wasn't anything new. Billy consumed Steve's thoughts. Billy consumed Steve's time. Billy consumed Steve's being. Steve's heart beat out Billy's name in an ever-present litany that was slowly driving Steve insane.

Billy. Billy. Billy. Billy Billy Billy. Billybillybilly.

Billy's eyes. Billy's smirking mouth. Billy's intelligence that was creeping through his façade.

Steve just wanted to know Billy. He wanted to talk to Billy. He wanted to feel Billy's eyes on him and see Billy's smile and know for that one instant he held all of Billy's attention.

Had Steve consumed Billy's thoughts as much as Billy was consuming his own? Had Billy's stomach tied itself into knots as much as Steve's did whenever he thought of Billy?

Was this love? If so, it wasn't a very comfortable feeling.

Steve was a nervous wreck as he paced back and forth in his kitchen the next day. His restless sleep left him feeling even more tired than when he'd gone to bed. It had been filled with dreams of tunnels and darkness that he could only remember in glimpses and in the growing anxiety that had settled in his chest, making it hard for him to breathe. He wondered if he would be plagued by these dreams and restless nights for the rest of his life. As he checked the clock – just after ten in the morning – Steve wondered how long the rest of his life would be. Did other teens worry about these things? Steve thought of Tommy and decided that most teens functioned in blissful ignorance of their own mortality.

Except Billy. Steve was sure that Billy – Billy whose mother was dead and whose father beat him within an inch of his life – was completely aware of his own mortality.

Steve drifted from room to room. Steve drifted from thought to thought. Finally, he decided that he'd had enough of being in his own head circling around his own feelings and getting nowhere. So he went back to the kitchen and grabbed a beer from the fridge.

Then he eyed the phone.

It was innocuous – it was just a phone. The curled cord was long enough so people could sit at the kitchen table and chat (like his mother did when she was talking to her sister) or pace around (like his father did whenever one of his underlings called). Steve took a small sip of beer and stared at it as he leaned back against the

counter. He took another sip and set the beer down, all while not taking his eyes off the phone. Taking a deep breath to steel himself, Steve took a step towards the phone. But he faltered, settled back against the counter, and grabbed his beer again. His heart was racing and his stomach was knotted so tight that he was surprised the beer had any place to go in his body, that it didn't just come back up his throat, that it didn't just choke him.

Steve's fingers trembled when he finally picked up the phone. He had to dial the number three times and almost hung up when he'd heard it start to ring. He checked the clock, it was 8:30 at night – Steve didn't know where the last ten hours had gone. He heard a click as someone picked up on the other end of the line.

"Family Video, Robin speaking, how can I help you?" came Robin's detached and professional phone voice, spewing the required greeting that Steve still forgot half the time.

Steve's voice stuck in his throat and he let out a wheezing gasp.

"Hello?" Robin said, voice tinged with impatience – prank calls weren't that uncommon.

"Uh..." Steve forced out and then cleared his throat to try again, but that just started him coughing.

"Steve?" Robin asked, voice tinged with even more impatience.

"Hi," Steve blurted out.

"Hi-iii," Robin said, drawing out the word in two syllables, raising the second syllable in a questioning tone.

"Uh..." Steve repeated. Now that he had Robin on the phone, he had no idea how to put into words all the things that he had been worrying about.

"Steve, what's up?" Her voice became muffled and Steve assumed that she'd put the phone between her ear and shoulder so she could get back to work, her attention already wandering to whatever she needed to get done.

“So, um.” He swallowed and wetted his lips.

Robin let out a long, exasperated sigh that hissed down the phoneline. “Spit it out, Steve, I don’t have all night.” Steve could hear her running the rewind machine and putting VHS tapes back into plastic cases.

“Okay, so, remember that time we got tortured by those Russians?” Steve asked, as he circled back to the counter to grab his beer, which was... empty. When had that happened?

“What! No?”

Steve could feel her eyeroll and see it perfectly in his mind. He sighed, loudly, and grabbed a second beer.

Robin snorted. “Kidding. Yes, it was a defining moment in my short life. One that I can’t talk about to anyone but you and a bunch of weird teens.”

“Right.” Steve cracked the beer open and took a long swallow. “Yeah. So... Do you remember what happened afterwards?”

“There was a giant monster,” Robin replied, lowering her voice as she said this. Steve wondered if someone had come into the store or if Robin was actually concerned that the government was listening. She continued, “It dissolved into black shit.”

“I mean, before then, like right after?” Steve tried to clarify. Why was this so difficult?

“Oh, going to see... what was that movie, I can’t remember it at all?”

Steve sighed again and rubbed his eyes. He wondered if Robin could hear how fast his heart was beating. It echoed so loud in his ears that it was starting to drown out his words. “No. In the bathroom. When you told me that you liked girls?”

“Yeah, another defining moment in my life. Hard to forget sharing shit like that with *King Steve*.” She paused, and then added in a teasing tone, “Especially after he hit on me.”

Steve nodded and, realizing that she couldn't see him (obviously), said, "Right. Yeah." Steve could hear Robin going back to the rewinding and wondered if she thought that this conversation was like every other conversation they'd had, like this conversation wasn't about to change his life.

"Okay, so what about it? Any more thoughts on Tammy and her muppet voice?"

"No!" Steve squeaked out and then flushed at the sound. He tried again, "No. I was – uh –" he swallowed. Why was his throat so dry? "– I was wondering how you knew?"

"How I knew that Tammy had a muppet voice? I'm pretty sure you were the one who told me that."

Steve knew she was deliberately avoiding the question and let out a loud sigh. "No, Robin, not that. I'm trying to be serious here."

Robin sounded apologetic when she said, "Sorry, it's hard to be serious about that stuff when you could die at any second from interdimensional monsters."

Steve's heart leapt into his throat. "Hop hasn't said anything about anything weird happening. He swears Doc Owens would let him know if something weird was happening."

"Would he though? Would he really?" Robin asked, still rewinding tapes – Steve was in awe of her ability to multitask. She continued, "Owens still works for the government. You don't know what he could be hiding. He could be working for the Soviets for all we know."

Steve laughed. "Have you been watching spy movies again?"

"Ye-esss..." Robin eventually capitulated.

"Maybe cut back on them?" Steve suggested, "I don't know how we're supposed to pretend like everything is normal if we're looking for conspiracies all the time."

"That's just it. I can't pretend everything is normal. As soon as I turn

18, I'm outta here. I don't know why you're still here."

"I guess that's kinda what I wanted to talk to you about," Steve said, even though what he actually wanted to talk about was so much more than that.

"Oh?"

"Uh. Okay. So, back to my question," he continued, and then gulped the rest of his beer – come on liquid courage. "How did you know you liked girls? Like actually liked them. And not guys?" God. He sounded like he was twelve. Not for the first time, Steve wished he had parents or an older sibling or someone he could've gone to for advice. Maybe then he wouldn't have been such an asshole. But he had Robin now, and she was helping to become a better person. But, sometimes, her sarcasm left him afraid of broaching sensitive subjects with her. Like this one.

"Ah," Robin let out a noise of understanding. "Right. I guess it's something I was always aware of, you know?"

"No," Steve sighed, "not really. Hence why I'm asking." He curled the cord around his index finger as he waited for Robin to respond – all his uncertainties were riding on her answer. No pressure, Robin.

"Okay," she said, after a minute of silence – Steve's heart beat a tattoo against his ribs – "better question. How do you know *you* like girls?"

Steve wasn't sure how to respond to this. He'd always liked girls and they'd always liked him, that was just the way things always had been. How did he know he liked girls? He really didn't know. "Um. I mean. I guess I've always just liked them. Maybe? They're pretty and nice and soft and like, listen to me. I dunno." Well, Steve berated himself, that was a non-answer if he'd ever heard one.

"Right," Robin laughed, "so same thing for me. Except for the listening bit – are you sure they listen to you?"

"Hey," Steve blurted out, "what's that supposed to mean?"

"Have you seen you? Everyone waxes poetic about you – your hair,

your body, your car, your money.”

Steve flushed.

Robin added, “I am sure there are girls that listen to you – like Nancy – but there are probably just as many girls that want to get into your pants.”

“Ummmmmm...” Steve wasn’t sure what to say to that. No one had ever – *ever* – put that so bluntly or been so nonchalant about sex in a clearly non-sexual situation.

“But that’s not what we’re talking about, Steve,” Robin said, voice quiet and kind. “You can find girls attractive; you can want to kiss them; you can want to sleep with them. You can do all of that without actually *liking* them – a hormonal teen driven by their hormones to do hormonal things.”

Steve didn’t respond, just took another swallow from his beer.

Robin continued, “Sure, you have to find something attractive about the person to do those things – maybe you like their eyes? Smile? Shape of their shoulders? The muscles of their legs?” she dropped her voice and added, “their ass? Tits?”

“Uh...” Steve said. Sure, those were things he liked. He thought of Billy’s shoulders and the way his thighs had bunched when he’d sprung to complete a layup at practice. Those were things he definitely liked.

“But there has to be something beyond physical attraction for me to actually like a girl,” Robin said, breaking into Steve’s thoughts. “There needs to be a connection. I need to be able to relax. We have to joke about things and agree about other things. You know?”

“I guess...” Steve said, but he wasn’t sure if he actually knew anything.

“I go to sleep thinking of her and wake up thinking of her. I think about her when she’s not here. All I want is to hold her hand or run my hands through her hair or look at her face when I’ve made her laugh or make her feel better when she’s sad. I dunno, Steve, there

just has to be that *something* that makes me want to be with her.”

“Yeah,” he agreed, miserably, because he was pretty sure he felt all of those things about Billy. He was pretty sure he’d felt them about Nancy at one point, too. And, maybe for a bit, Nancy had felt that way about him.

“But,” Robin added, “she has to feel the same way too. There is nothing more painful than unrequited love. Well... maybe getting tortured by those Soviets.”

“Uh-huh,” Steve agreed.

“You okay, Steve?”

“Uh-huh,” Steve said again, heart thudding and blood pounding in his ears.

“Why’d you wanna know?”

Steve swallowed the remainder of his second beer and grabbed a third one. “I think...” he started to say. But he wasn’t sure if he could force the words out.

Robin waited for a bit, and then prompted, “You think...?”

“I mean, I maybe...” Steve gulped his beer again, swallowing until it, too, was empty.

“Steve?” Robin asked, worry lacing her voice. “Should I be worried?”

“No,” he said, taking some deep breaths. “I think... I like...” He couldn’t do this. Facing down monsters and Soviets was one thing, but admitting something like this?

But.

But Robin had trusted him. He needed to trust her.

Steve swallowed for the hundredth time in this conversation. “I think I like *Billy*.” He whispered Billy’s name as if that would somehow make it better. It didn’t. He thought he was going to be sick. Could he

take it back? When those thoughts lived only in his head, Steve didn't have to deal with them. But now, it was out. He'd said the words. He'd let them loose. He couldn't take them back. They were gone. And now Robin *knew*.

To his surprise, Robin snorted, but before he could react, she said, "Finally. I was wondering when you were going to figure it out."

Steve was stunned. Steve was confused. Steve was a little angry that he'd worked up all of his courage for Robin to just say *finally*. "What," he managed to blurt out.

"Sorry," Robin said, tone more serious, "I shouldn't have said it that way."

"Oh?"

"Steve, all you've been talking about for the last eight months is Billy."

"What, no," Steve said, voice rising in panic. Did everyone know?

"Don't worry," Robin said, as if she could read his mind and understood his panic, "no one else has noticed."

"Okay, good," Steve whispered, wandering over to the fridge to get a fourth beer. He felt like the world was moving in slow motion.

"You're still you," Robin said, "you're still the same person we all love. You know that, right?"

"Sure," he agreed. Was he though?

"Sexuality is fluid. Just because you like Billy doesn't mean that you won't ever like girls again. And, even if you don't, does that matter?"

"I don't know," Steve muttered.

"What's really bothering you?" asked Robin. "That you maybe like guys now or the guy that you do like is Billy?"

"What if," he croaked out, then he swallowed and continued, "what if

the Billy I like doesn't exist? I don't actually know him. All I know is what I've learned from Max and Hop and El. But we've never actually talked, you know?"

"Uh-huh," Robin said, "that is a risk. And there's the possibility of him never waking up. Or him not remembering you when he wakes up. Or him wanting to get the fuck outta dodge when he wakes up and remembers everything--"

"Robin!" Steve felt the panic rising, even though he'd already thought about all those scenarios.

"Sorry! Sorry. Not helping."

Steve swallowed more beer, because more alcohol would make him feel better, right? Never mind the fact that room was now spinning a bit and his voice was coming from far away. "What do I do?" he managed to spit out.

Robin let out a little sigh. "Wait and see, I guess. You can't make any decisions without talking to him. And that's not gonna happen until he wakes up..." She didn't add *if he does wake up*, but the words were loud in the silence.

Steve took a deep breath. "Okay," he whispered.

"And, keep talking to me," Robin added. "You still are a dingus, but I know some of what you're going through... You're not alone, Steve."

"Thanks, Rob," Steve said, feeling both better and worse. He'd told her. He'd actually said out loud the things he was feeling and that made them real, concrete, solid, and, therefore, so much scarier.

It was Wednesday afternoon and Max and El had just left. When Steve saw they were in Billy's room, he'd almost turned around and walked back to his car. But Steve had finally convinced himself to talk to Billy (even if Billy wasn't able to talk back). Steve's logic was that this could be like a practice round or something, tell Billy how he feels and get the words right so when (if) Billy woke up, Steve would know exactly what he wanted to say.

That was the theory anyway. Steve would probably still be the same shivering, anxious wreck that he was right now when Billy was awake.

So, when Max and El took off – “We’re going to the arcade, Steve, could you get us later?” – Steve had nodded absently, not really hearing what he was agreeing to. Instead, his brain was focused on the things he needed – *wanted?* – to say. So, Steve stayed and tried to will the words into existence. He wished he was more articulate.

“So,” Steve said, pacing already because the nervous energy that had been building under his skin since that conversation with El could no longer be contained. “Uh, I know it’s been a couple of days and I’m sure you missed me – or maybe you liked the quiet. I dunno,” Steve swallowed and glanced over at Billy, who lay as impassive as ever, “dude, you’re not giving me much to work with.”

Sighing, Steve finally sat down, but the anxious energy leaked out through the continuous jiggle of his knee, the tap-tap-tap of his fingers on the plastic armrest, the darting of his eyes from Billy’s face to the clock to the door to the window to Billy’s face to the machines monitoring Billy’s vitals to the clock and back again. *Breathe, Steve, just breathe.* “You don’t know this, but the only reason you’re alive is because of El, she made your heart pump with her *mind* while me and Nance were doing CPR.”

The machines beeped. The clock ticked. Somewhere down the hall, Steve could hear footsteps and voices that weren’t quite loud enough to make out actual words.

And Steve remembered the blood and the monstrous ichor and all the people that had surrounded Billy, trying to stop him from bleeding out. “I dunno how you lived, you were lucky, dude, seriously lucky that your heart hadn’t been obliterated. Man, I saw it from the second floor, and I thought you were a goner.”

Steve stood and started pacing again. Actively not looking at Billy, he continued, “And, honestly when I saw that, I was so fucking pissed – you’d gone from this fucking asshole to someone with–” *layers* “–*Iayers*, and then you were going to fucking die and I didn’t have a chance to get to know this new, *layered* person.”

Finally, Steve stopped next to Billy's head, and looked down at Billy's face – calm, serene, completely devoid of any expression. And Steve hated it. He wanted Billy screaming and yelling. He wanted Billy licking his lips and sticking out his tongue. He wanted Billy alive and full of everything that made him *Billy*. Steve leaned over and whispered, wondering if he'd get any kind of reaction, "Because I'd seen you, y'know, you were watching me all the time, bro." Then Steve let out a little laugh, and straightened up and continued, "Seriously – you gotta work on your fucking subtlety. And I thought that maybe you were just biding your time, or some shit, until you could beat me up again. But you didn't. And that was so fucking confusing."

Steve thoughts raced and he couldn't keep pacing and thinking because multitasking was sometimes hard, especially with his racing thoughts. So he plunked back down in the chair, and said, "Billy, you're just confusing." But confusing didn't even cover it. And was he going to do this? Like telling Robin was one thing. One very difficult thing that almost caused him to vomit. So, was he going to actually say this? He leaned forward and put his face into his hands. "And now, now, I find out that you, well you... Uh." Steve stopped. His heart was racing, it no longer it beat in time with Billy's. He shut his eyes and whispered, "Dude, this is hard." He wetted his lips and tried to get some saliva in his mouth to help the words come out. "Yeah, okay, c'mon, Steve, spit it out, he's asleep." Breath. Pause. Breath.

Steve opened his eyes and moved his hands to make sure that Billy was still asleep. Ha, wouldn't that be the most inopportune timing? But Billy's eyes were closed. "Okay, so, yeah, El said that you loved me. Like she actually said *loved* and not liked. And I-I don't really know what to do with that. Billy, I don't remember the last time anyone loved me."

Steve's stomach felt hollow – *maybe he was hungry?* – as he said, "I thought Nancy did, but she called me—"

You're pretending like – like everything is okay. Like we're in love. It's bullshit. You're bullshit.

"–bullshit and she's with Jonathan now and it's fine because I don't love her anymore anyways and it's fine – I'm fine." But it still hurt.

“But El said you do, or maybe it’s did?” Steve finally looked at Billy, but his face hadn’t changed. There was nothing to indicate that Billy was doing anything other than sleeping peacefully. Steve sighed, “I dunno, you’ve been asleep for so long that maybe you don’t feel those things anymore.” Because people always leave. “And, like, I dunno what to do with this new info – it’s seriously fucking me up – you keep changing more and more into a person that I want to know, or I wished I did know, or some shit like that, y’know? Like, maybe, we coulda been friends. Or something else.”

Maybe you could have loved me, and I could’ve loved you.

“Dude, I dunno. I can’t figure this shit out until you wake up. So. Just. Wake. The. Fuck. Up. Billy.”

Well, Steve thought, that’s it. The floor can swallow me up now. And all of a sudden, he was exhausted. The adrenaline that had been keeping him going dissipated. It was gone and Steve let himself slouch down, close his eyes, and drift. Maybe he’d just drift away. That’d be nice.

But, no, Steve couldn’t do that yet. He needed to actually talk to Billy. He needed to grow up – *be a man* his brain supplied in his father’s voice – and face his feelings. Maybe. Steve cleared his throat and opened his eyes. That’s when he saw the tears and heard the beeping of the machine monitoring Billy’s heartrate speed up. Steve wondered if Billy was having a nightmare. He reached out and grabbed Billy’s arm, thinking that the physical contact might bring Billy back to himself. He stroked his thumb up and down Billy’s forearm. His skin was cool, and Steve wondered if he should adjust Billy’s blanket to cover his arms. To wrap him up tight and make him feel safe and secure.

The beeping continued to speed up.

Steve said, trying to be soothing, “Billy, it’s okay, you’re okay.” It was a mantra he repeated to himself when he was awake in the dark, alone, scared, and so fucking tired. The tears continued to run down Billy’s face, so Steve leaned over him and wiped one side and then the other with his thumb, hoping he got all of them before they ran into Billy’s ears.

The beeping slowed.

“So,” Steve said, sitting back down. C’mon, Harrington, you gotta keep talking. He likes your voice, remember? “El says you’re getting closer. She and Max were here earlier. They’d switched to a book of limericks that Max’d found a few days ago. Man, they were both in stitches – I didn’t know limericks were so funny.” Steve paused and remembered the two of them giggling and Max’s face turning an impressive shade of red. “Although, now that I think about it, they actually sounded pretty dirty – probably why they were laughing so hard. Max said it was a nice break from that sad shit you’d had in your car.” Those books were safely stowed in Steve’s bedside table, he hadn’t wanted to bring them back because he didn’t want to make Billy cry again. But here Billy was, crying anyway.

“Man. Billy Hargrove, secret lover of poetry, who knew? Well, clearly you did. But, as we all now know, you were good at hiding shit.” Steve swallowed as his brain flashed back to the x-rays. He wondered if those images would be implanted in his brain for the rest of his life. Probably. Steve’s brain was good at remembering the sad shit, the horrific shit, the shit that he just wanted to forget. He wondered if Billy would be able to forget all the awful things that had happened to him – probably not. Trauma in your formative years tended to stick with you, bleeding through for the rest of your life. Or something like that.

“Is it weird,” Steve said, trying to pull himself from his negative thoughts, “that I think of you as a friend even though we’ve never had a real conversation? Like, my mom–”

He’s defective. You have to do something about it.

“–calls and asks me about my friends – I tell her about Robin and the kids and you – not that I say much about you,” *except that you’re everything to me and I can’t tell anyone*, “my mom finally figured out you were in a coma. Which, I mean, is ridiculous, but I guess I didn’t say much about you for a long time and then she says to me, ‘Steve’,” Steve pitched his voice higher, but still tried to convey the dismissive tone his mother always took with him, like she was asking questions that she really didn’t want answers to, “‘who’s this Billy you keep talking about?’ And that stopped me, y’know, I didn’t know how to

explain you. So, I just said you were a friend who was in that mall accident, who I was visiting in the hospital. My mom didn't *even* remember that there was an accident at Starcourt. Tells you how much they're involved in my life." Steve sighed and wondered why his parents had even had a kid if they didn't care about him.

Steve's brain was still going in circles, so he shifted back to what was bothering him. Mainly Billy. Always Billy. And his feelings for Billy. "El says you dream about me. I know she shouldn't be looking – *she* knows she shouldn't be looking – but, I just had to know, y'know, if you still liked – *loved* – me. She says you do. And, dude, I dunno what to do about that." Steve stopped as he felt his panic rising. Inhale, one, two, three, exhale, one, two, three. He tried to match his count with the rhythmic beeping of the machine. Don't panic.

"Because," Steve finally said, voice lowered as if he didn't want to be overheard, "I think there might a part of me that hopes you do. But if you *do* and I-I want that, what does that mean? Like, man, we don't even know each other anymore, not that we ever did, y'know, beyond that whole male posturing shit – you can blame Nancy for that concept. Sometimes," Steve further dropped his voice so it was barely a whisper, "I dream about you – not just nightmares, but like *other*–"

I've been wanting to do this since the first time I saw you at that stupid party.

"–dreams. And, well. Fuck. Billy. I dunno. I just don't know. I talked to Robin and she says sexuality is fluid. But, what if..." Steve paused and took some breaths. He leaned forward, placed his elbows on the bed, and put his head back into his hands, trying to make it easier for him to get the words out. Trying to voice the thing that was scaring him the most.

"What if," Steve said into his palms, "what if I just made you up? What if I put you on a pedestal and you'll wake up and you won't even want to be friends with me. I know that sounds pathetic – it is – but I don't have much good shit going on in my life – I work at a dead-end job, can't get into college, my dad hates me – or is at least so disappointed in me that he doesn't come home anymore – it's not like I can tell him that I've helped save Hawkins three different times

and that I'm an *excellent* babysitter – not that it would really matter to him. So, like the good shit I have is really just the people I hang out with – Robin, the kids, even Nancy and Jonathan, – and you. I think I've been by everyday in the past month – I've spent more time with you this past year than I have my own parents. You know all my secrets – you may not remember them, but I've told you all of them. And what if you wake up and you don't want anything to do with me? Fuck." Steve stopped his tirade. Had he even taken a breath during it? Did it make it better or worse that he said his fear – that Billy wouldn't want him – out loud? Steve really didn't know. But he was exhausted again. That second wind was totally gone. Maybe his brain would let him sleep now? Steve slouched back and, furtively looking around to make sure there wasn't anyone around – there wasn't – he let himself hold Billy's hand. He closed his eyes and imagined that it was just the two of them, lounging somewhere warm and sunny. He stroked his thumb over the back of Billy's hand, feeling the roughness of the hairs on it, feeling the scars on Billy's knuckles. He could have this quiet moment. His brain would surely give him that.

Yes. His brain relished in the contentment of that fantasy, so Steve actually let himself drift.

But.

But then the hand in Steve's hand moved. Was he dreaming?

Steve opened his eyes and jerked up. He must be dreaming. Because Billy's blue eyes were open and were looking at him.

But then the hand in Steve's hand flipped over, so they were palm against palm. It's a move that Steve had wanted for so long, that his brain was making him see things and feel things that couldn't possibly be happening.

But then the hand in Steve's hand squeezed. Billy was squeezing his hand. Billy was awake. Billy saw him. *Billy squeezed his hand.* Do something, Harrington.

Steve smiled, smiled so hard that his face hurt. His eyes stung. He squeezed Billy's hand back and then slowly brought his other hand

up to touch Billy's face. He watched Billy's eyes, trying to make sure it was okay. Billy didn't look afraid, so Steve stroked his thumb over Billy's cheek and felt the muscles shift under it as Billy smiled.

This was actually happening.

Steve cleared his throat and, around the lump that was beginning to form there, said, "Hey, it's been awhile."

Notes for the Chapter:

I always appreciate comments and kudos! They're a little hit of dopamine that I try not to rely on but love anyways.

Stay safe everyone <3

8. how do I end up this way?

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey everyone! I know it's been a long time but life took over. Here's a chapter, hopefully I'll have another one soon.

Just a heads up, Billy's thoughts get kind of dark. Please let me know on here or tumblr if I missed any tags.

Also!! There are now perspective changes between Steve and Billy, denoted by a horizontal line - I hope this isn't too confusing.

AND, finally, I have not really re-read this in its entirety and it's unbeta'd, so all mistakes are my own and I will try to fix them soon.

The first time Steve Harrington hugged Billy Hargrove it was a Thursday. It was June 12th and Billy had just done his best to make Steve hate him.

Or, at least that's how Steve interpreted the situation.

But Steve could never hate him – he ached for Billy, seeing him there in pain, suffering both internal and external torments. Steve wanted to wrap Billy up, make him feel safe and loved, even if only for a few minutes. He could see Billy spiralling, could see him tearing himself apart, flinging those pieces away as if they meant nothing. And Steve wanted – needed – to pick them up and give them back to Billy. He needed to help Billy somehow fit himself back together so he could figure out where he fit into Billy's life.

In Steve's opinion, the only good part of May was Billy waking up; the rest of the month was a disaster.

Steve had been staring at Billy, waiting for him to say something, say

anything. Why had Steve said that? Like who says *It's been awhile* to someone in a coma? It was possible that no time had passed to Billy; one minute he'd been dying on the mall floor, the next he was opening his eyes to see Steve Harrington, of all people, and Steve was holding his hand. It was possible Billy didn't even know who Steve was when Billy had interlaced their fingers. Maybe he had amnesia? Or—

“Steve,” Billy said, his voice was barely a whisper and so raspy, that Steve started looking around for some water to give him. Billy squeezed Steve's hand harder, bringing Steve's attention back to him. “Steve,” he said again, “how long?”

“Oh, uh, I'm not sure if I'm supposed to tell you that. Like maybe there needs to be a doctor here? Or maybe a par—” *don't say parent, Harrington, he hasn't got any parents left* “—an adult? Wait, I'm an adult. Not me though, it shouldn't be me. I should get someone. Yeah, I'll just go get someone. C'mon Steve, be the adult here, but not the responsible adult though. Ummmm... Fuck.”

Billy rubbed his thumb over the back of Steve's hand, stopping Steve's ramble.

“Or,” Steve muttered, “I could just stay here. This is good, too. Man, Billy, it's really good to see you.” The ‘awake’ went unsaid, but still hung in the air between them.

“Yeah,” breathed Billy, closing his eyes. “I was having the weirdest dreams.”

Steve wanted to say me too and that Billy had been showing up in most of them. And lately they had become increasingly... sexual and did Billy actually hear what Steve had said and—

But he couldn't say that; Billy had just woken up and Steve didn't know what he'd do if Billy went back to sleep. “Hey, I know you're probably really tired,” Steve said, “but, could you, maybe, hold off on closing your eyes? It's just...”

“What,” Billy croaked, opening one eye to look at Steve, “you're afraid that you'll have imagined this if I go back to sleep?”

“Yeah, something like that.”

Billy gave a little snort but opened his eyes again and Steve couldn't look away. His heart was racing, and he was pretty sure his palms were starting to sweat. How much had Billy heard? Had he heard everything? Did he know that Steve was...? That Steve wanted...? That Steve was probably... in love with him?

“You gonna keep staring?” Billy asked, startling Steve from his spiralling thoughts.

“Would you mind?” Steve asked, not knowing how to say that looking at Billy was somehow easing the anxiety that had held Steve captive for the past ten months.

Billy slowly shook his head and smiled. “Nah, I don't mind. Probably not much to look at though. I feel like I've been torn apart and someone has Frankensteined me back together.”

“You look...” *beautiful, perfect, like the best thing I've seen in the past ten months* “good, uh, really good. Y'know considering...”

“Considering...? That I drank a bunch of chemicals and got stabbed by a bunch of monster tentacles?”

“Right, yeah, that. I wasn't sure if you would remember all of... that.”

“I-I,” Billy started to say, and Steve could see the panic flood Billy's eyes. Billy was probably remembering all the stuff that he'd done, and Steve didn't want that. Billy could do that later, maybe, when he was feeling better, like a year from now, when he wasn't so fragile. Or a decade. A decade seemed better.

“Hey, man, it's okay. I should probably get someone, tell someone you're awake,” Steve said, quickly, trying to assuage Billy's panic, to stop Billy's thoughts from going back to the things he'd done when he was the Mind Flayer's puppet. Steve stroked his thumb over the back of Billy's hand – mirroring what Billy had done seconds earlier – hoping that his presence would ease Billy's guilt, soothe Billy's conscience, show Billy that he still had people who cared about him.

Steve would be happy to live in this moment – Billy’s blue eyes on him, Billy’s hand in his own, Billy solely focused on him – forever.

But it came to an end when Nurse Dean came in to check Billy’s vitals – what was just a daily routine check turned into something big and nebulous. Things happened all at once, but Steve only remembered them in slow motion. Images and sounds and sensations that jumped forward, like a skipping record. Nurse Flagg’s bony fingers digging into his shoulder as she tried to get him to let go of Billy’s hand. Another nurse saying, “Come on, hon, we have to run some tests, you need to leave now,” when Steve had protested. The feeling of Billy’s fingers slipping from his own and Steve’s attempts to grab them again. The doctor saying, in a stern voice, “You have to leave now, son,” and giving Steve a firm shove on his lower back. Steve remembers leaning against the doorway, trying to stay invisible as nurses and doctors gathered in Billy’s room.

A doctor was shining a light in his eyes and saying, “Pupil response normal.”

A nurse was leaning over him asking him questions, like did he remember his name?

William Dylan Hargrove.

Did he know who his father was?

Neil Hargrove.

His mother?

Frances Margaret Hargrove, her friends called her Frannie.

Hmmmm, we have a “Susan” listed here.

Susan’s my stepmother.

Okay, that’s good, honey. Any siblings?

Max – Maxine. She’s my sis – stepsister.

(Steve wanted to say that Max had already decided Billy was her brother, that it was okay.)

Nurse Flagg finally noticed Steve standing in the doorway and dragged him back to the waiting room. “Only family is allowed to see him,” she forced out through clenched teeth. “When the doctors feel Billy’s ready, he can see other people. But, just family for now.”

Steve wanted to fight against that demand; he’d been allowed to see Billy all along, why did that have to change now? But he took in Nurse Flagg’s steely gaze and ramrod straight back and decided that he’d have to pick his battles with her. Maybe he could ask Max or Susan to talk to Billy’s doctors for him?

Steve sat in the waiting room and wondered if he should call Max and Susan to let them know that Billy had woke up. But it was more than likely that the doctor would call them, right? And, besides, he didn’t have any answers to the questions that they would ask. Steve didn’t know how Billy was doing or if he was going to be fully healed or how long until he’d be able to go home. No, it would be better for the doctor to tell them. And Steve could sit here. Sit here with his thoughts.

Steve’s thoughts were jumbled, his emotions were tied into knots; they were no longer separate entities. Worry and anxiety built in his stomach. What if this was the end? What if he could no longer see Billy and talk to him like he had been doing? What if Billy waking up from his coma was the end of the most stable relationship Steve had?

Steve physically shook himself with revulsion. This was what he was worried about? Here he was, thinking about himself *again*. Billy was finally awake just down the hallway. This was a thing that should be celebrated, shouted from the rooftops. Steve should only be feeling joy.

But he wasn’t.

Sure, Steve was absolutely elated. But he was also afraid. Afraid because he didn’t know where he stood with Billy. Afraid because he

didn't know when he'd get a chance to figure that out.

Billy couldn't understand why he was so tired. Hadn't he been asleep for ten months? Why did he keep drifting off? He'd blink and Max would go from sitting next to him with a book cracked open on her lap to fast asleep making these little snuffling snoring sounds.

Blink.

Steve transformed into Susan.

Blink.

The once empty chair was now occupied by a small dark-haired woman with kind eyes. When she saw that he was awake, she told him her name was Joyce. "I'm Jonathan's and Will's mom," she said, but when she saw Billy's confusion, she added, "don't worry about, honey, just get some sleep."

Billy had tried to ask why she was here, sitting with him. But the words got stuck in his throat and his eyes drifted shut.

Blink.

The girl from his dreams who had introduced herself as El, but Billy had no idea if that was actually her name, was sitting on the end of

his bed, reading. Billy tried not to blink. He needed to make sure she was real and... that he hadn't actually hurt her. He needed to apologize. He needed...

"Go back to sleep, Billy," El said, her dark eyes meeting his over her tattered copy of *The Hobbit*, "we'll talk when you're better."

Blink.

The Hobbit transformed into a single issue of *Wonder Woman*. El changed into Max. It was dark out.

Blink.

Steve sat in the chair, *Firestarter* held loosely in one hand, and asked El, who leant against Billy's bed, "Have you ever tried to start fires?"

El responded with a solemn, "I can't."

Billy wondered if she had tried to set something on fire at some point or if that was a power she innately knew she didn't have.

Blink.

A dark-haired boy with large, sad eyes sat in the chair, staring off into space. When he saw that Billy had opened his eyes, the kid stood up and leaned over Billy. "I'm Will," he said, softly, "Joyce is my mom."

Billy tried to say something that sounded like a greeting, but it came out as a grunt. He struggled to keep his eyes open, wanting to talk to

Will to see what had happened after the mall, but they were growing heavy.

Will smiled when he saw Billy's eyelids dropping, and said, "The doctor said you'd be tired; your brain is using a lot of energy now that you're not in a coma. Maybe, you should, uh, just let yourself sleep?" He settled back into the chair and opened some sort of fantasy gaming manual.

Billy lost the battle; his eyes closed of their own volition.

Blink.

Max.

Blink.

Steve.

Blink.

Susan.

Blink.

Steve.

Blink.

Billy's lying on a beach, the sun is warm on his face. His mother with her blonde hair coming loose from her braid is sitting next to him. She smiles at him.

"You're getting better," she says. "Maybe you can come visit me soon?"

Blink.

Empty room. Billy wondered where Neil was, if he was ever going to show up. He remembered both El and Steve had said Neil had left, but that was in his dreams, not real life. He didn't know what he'd do if he opened his eyes and saw Neil.

Panic, probably. He wasn't strong enough to defend himself from anything. Hell, he could barely stay awake for more than five minutes at a time.

Fuck.

Blink.

A nurse leaned over him. "Ah, good, you're awake," she said, "I'm Nurse Dean, and the doctor would like you to start physio today."

"Huh?" Billy asked, brain fuzzy as he tried to comprehend her words. Physio. What the fuck. He didn't think he'd be able to stay awake for anything that required physical effort.

"Oh, don't worry, dear," Nurse Dean said, in what Billy assumed was

supposed to be calming tone, but it just made him want to yell at her. “You don’t have to move yet; it’s going to be more of an assessment to see where you’re at.”

By the end of it, Billy wanted to kill his physiotherapist. Or himself. All these things he used to be able to do – lift his legs up, make a fist, hold out his arms, sit up – they were all fucking gone. And Billy didn’t know how he was ever going to be able to get his strength back.

“Don’t worry,” the physiotherapist – a burly guy named Paul – had said, when he’d seen how frustrated Billy had been getting. “Bodies are resilient. They adapt. You’re gonna be out of here in no time.”

Billy had wanted to growl, to gnash his teeth, to rage (against the dying of the light). But that took too much energy.

Instead. He purposefully closed his eyes. When he woke, he’d be stronger, right? That was the only way he’d be able to keep going.

Blink.

Steve sat in the chair. His eyes were closed, head tipped back against the wall. Billy cleared his throat, which caused Steve to jerk his head up.

“Hey,” Steve said, “you’re awake again. You’ve been pretty out of it the last few times I’ve stopped by.”

Billy swallowed and licked his lips.

“You want some water?” Steve asked, already leaning over to pass Billy the cup that stood on the table next to his head.

Billy shook his head; he could already feel sleep calling his name. That physio session had taken a lot out of him. “Neil,” he croaked.

Then he cleared his throat and swallowed again. “Is Neil...? Has Neil come by?” Billy asked, the words came a little easier this time, but his stomach was a tight knot of anxiety; he didn’t know which answer he wanted.

“Huh?” Steve asked, clearly confused. “Why would...? Oh. Shit. Did... uh, did Susan not tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

“Man, I’m sorry, well I’m not sorry at all, because Neil’s a...” Steve trailed off. He let out a little laugh and rolled his eyes. “Billy, Neil’s gone.”

“Huh?”

Steve leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. “Neil left town. He left as soon as you were admitted to the hospital.”

“What?” Billy breathed out. Neil had actually left town? Where had he gone? And how had Billy dreamed about that? But he had helped an interdimensional Monster make a human meat-suit, maybe prophetic dreams were not that big of a deal in the grand scheme of things – not that Billy believed in a grand scheme anyway.

“Yeah,” Steve said, emphatically nodding his head, as if this would get the point across faster. “Neil is gone. He probably knew that Hop would have arrested him after he’d seen your x-rays.”

Billy shut his eyes as his heart dropped. Oh shit. Everyone knew. They knew what Neil had done to him. They knew what Billy *had let* Neil do. They knew.

Steve knew. And now Steve would just look at Billy with pity.

“Billy?” Steve said, tone questioning, like he’d said Billy’s name more than once.

Billy looked at him, expecting to see pity, expecting to see hate. But Steve just looked somewhat concerned.

“He’s gone,” Steve said, “he’s not gonna hurt you or anyone else.

Don't worry about it. If he shows up, I'll kill – kick – I'll kick his ass.” Steve reached out, squeezed Billy's forearm, and rubbed his thumb gently over Billy's skin.

Billy let out a deep sigh and felt the lump in his throat. The knot in his stomach loosened. He was relieved Neil was gone. Really, he was. But. But some small, hidden part of him, had hoped that maybe Neil would have been there, clasped Billy's shoulder, and told Billy that he was glad Billy survived, that he'd do better, be better. That he was sorry.

It was wishful thinking, Billy knew that.

He turned away from Steve and let the tears that had been gathering at the corners of his eyes leak out.

Blink.

A man sat in the chair, his curly gray hair unruly, like he'd been running his hand through it. He had a magazine propped open, resting on a leg with the foot resting on the knee. He looked the picture of nonchalance. But Billy saw the clench of his jaw muscles and the open and closing of the fist that was resting on his leg and Billy knew that this man was not relaxed. Not in the slightest.

Billy cleared his throat and the man jerked up, startled out of whatever reverie he had been in.

Seeing that Billy was awake and alert, the man said, “Good. I wasn't sure if I'd be able to talk to you today. Your doctors have informed me that your... uh... energy levels are still somewhat irregular.”

Billy didn't say anything to this. He was very aware that his energy levels were *irregular*, especially if by irregular, they meant nonexistent. Billy had seemed to use up all his residual energy on the first day with Steve and was now trying to fill his rapidly depleting levels. It wasn't working though.

“Right,” the man said after it was clear Billy wasn’t going to respond. “You probably don’t remember me; I was here when they brought you in. I’m Dr. Sam Owens. You can call me Sam if you’d like.” Then he added, under his breath, “Most people don’t though.”

“Hey Doc,” Billy croaked out, letting what he hoped was a good imitation of his usual smirk spread across his features.

Owens chuckled as he got up and passed Billy a small cup of water. Billy had to use all of his concentration to bring the cup to his mouth, his muscles were still exhausted from the physio session he’d had the day before. Owens stared out the window, seemingly unperturbed by Billy’s struggle, which, in all honesty, Billy appreciated; he was so tired of people doing things for him, he missed being self-sufficient – especially, when it seemed to him that he’d been as strong as ever only a few weeks ago. But it was becoming readily apparent that being in a months long coma really fucked with your perception of time.

Billy shakily set the cup down, his movements causing Owens’ attention to turn back to him.

“Better?” Owens asked, stepping closer to Billy’s bed. And when Billy nodded, Owens stuck out his hand and added, “Good to meet you, Mr. Hargrove.”

Billy glanced from the hand to Owens’ face, trying to see if the doc was trying to pull something by calling him that. But Owens’ expression was guileless and open, hand still held out expectantly. Taking a deep breath and slowly exhaling, Billy returned Owens’ grip with one of his own, one severely lacking the strength he remembered. “Just Billy,” he said, “Mr. Hargrove is my father and. Uh. He’d rather not be associated with me, right now.”

“Sorry ‘bout that, Billy,” Doc Owens responded, giving Billy’s hand a quick shake. “I should’ve asked what you prefer to be called.” He grinned. “Most people I deal with are quite concerned about respect and hierarchies and the like.” Owens sat back down, resuming the position he’d been in when Billy woke up, sans magazine, which had fallen carelessly to the floor when Billy had startled him.

“Respect and hierarchies,” Billy parroted, voice still raspy despite the water. “You some kind government man?”

Owens chuckled and Billy was beginning to suspect that Owens did that a lot, possibly as some sort of nervous response? Billy wasn’t sure.

“Something like that,” Owens said. “But it doesn’t really matter who I work for. I’m here to help you.”

“Right,” Billy muttered, rolling his eyes. Owens’ deflection indicated that he did, in fact, work for the government, probably some sort of shadowy branch if he was to be taken at his word that he’d been there when Billy had been brought to the hospital. They don’t call just anyone when dealing with monsters. “So you work for the government, but you’re here to help me?”

“Yes. I’m here to make sure that your progressing as well as to be expected. And to make sure there are no...,” Owens drew out the word, looking decidedly uncomfortable, “unexpected consequences.”

“Consequences?”

“Side-effects.”

“Of what, exactly?” Billy asked.

“Well,” said the doc, putting both his feet on the ground, propping his elbows on his knees, and steepling his fingers, “that remains to be seen.”

Billy couldn’t help it, he laughed. “They train you on this whole ‘answering questions thing without actually saying anything’ routine? Or is that just your personality?”

Owens swallowed and then sighed, dropping his head, and exposing the back of his neck to Billy. And—

grab him. You need to build it. Come on. Grab him. I can still come back.

—Billy shuddered as the voice whispered in the back of his mind. He didn’t know if it was actually there or if he was imagining it.

"I'll tell you what I can," Owens was saying as Billy came back to himself, "and you're going to have to sign a bunch of papers – NDAs – saying you won't talk about this with anyone. Just me and the chief."

"The chief?"

"Hopper," replied Owens, looking a little surprised, "he's stopped by quite a few times to check on you, I had assumed you were acquainted."

Billy shook his head; he'd seen the guy around town and instinctively stayed away – Hopper was a big man and Billy was not a fan of law enforcement in general and especially not a fan of someone who looked like he could do a lot of damage with those large fists in specific.

"Oh, well." Owens cleared his throat and continued with, "He's signed the same NDA."

"Right," Billy said, deciding that talking to Hopper was the last thing he'd be doing any time soon.

"Right," Owens agreed, he reached down to the brief case that had been propped against his chair leg and pulled out a packet of papers. "Here's what you'll need to sign."

Billy had never realized how exhausting listening could be. When Doc Owens left his room an hour later, Billy wanted to sleep for a week. Part of that was because his brain was still trying to understand what exactly Owens had told him. A creature – monster Billy's brain had supplied – from another dimension had forced its way through a barrier – a barrier that scientists had created. Which, in itself, was rather fucked up.

"Mind control, psychic soldiers, that sort of thing," Owens had said. "But they hadn't anticipated what would happen."

Billy had snorted. Who could have ever anticipated what would happen in experiments like those?

But, instead of leaving this *thing* well enough alone, some crazy scientist had decided to poke it with a stick to see how it would respond. Death. That's how it responded. Breaking through the barrier into Hawkins to feed on its citizens in the dark of night, stealing them away. And it would have kept doing this, but it had taken Will. And Hopper and Mrs. Byers—

Really? Tiny, unassuming Joyce had fought a monster to get her son back? And Billy's mother had just given up on herself and him. That had stung and Billy tried not to think about it; his mother and Joyce were two very different people and different situations. But. Still. It stung

—had gone into this other dimension to get Will back. All while *kids* stopped the monster. What kind of sick, fucked-up people let kids take on a monster? Clearly the ones who had stolen a girl from her mother and trained her to be a weapon.

And the scientists and military had been packed up and shipped off (or murdered). Owens and his team had been sent in to clean it up. To monitor, to make sure there hadn't been any unintended side effects. But there had been. Something worse had tried to force its way into Hawkins. And Hopper and that little girl — El — had stopped it, just in time.

But. Billy thought bitterly, that hadn't gotten all of it. No. It was like a cancer. Sure, the girl had excised the tumor, but some cells had remained behind. And those cells, well, they had infected Billy. And—

Don't be afraid. It'll all be over soon. Just try to hold still.

—others. A disease that spread throughout Hawkins, infecting some, but not others. And that disease had changed these people on a cellular level, transforming them into the physical manifestation of a Lovecraftian horror. And Billy remembered this horror.

It had killed him. He had stood between this monster and that same little girl, hoping that this one good deed could erase the hundreds of bad deeds that had blackened his soul — he wasn't even sure he'd believed in souls. He remembered that he'd just wanted to make things better, for once, not worse. And maybe he had for a second,

because he'd been dying, but he remembered the girl at the end, as everything was fading. That girl had been there, hand on his face, telling him to hold on, and Billy had died knowing that he'd help save her.

But he hadn't remained dead, clearly.

Billy didn't know what to do with this new information. It wasn't like it excused him from his past actions – murders, sacrifices, assaults – even though everyone – Steve, El, Max, Will, Joyce, Susan – had been acting like it did. It didn't. Billy still had the blood of so many people on his hands.

"I'm here so you have someone to talk to about this," Owens had said as he was packing away Billy's signed forms (it wasn't like he couldn't sign them). "I've been trained as a psychologist, although I mostly practice as a medical doctor. But," Owens had grinned, as if this explained everything, "these are strange times."

Billy hadn't responded. He didn't know what to say. He didn't know how to say that it didn't matter that something else had been controlling his body. It had still been *his* body. He'd been the puppet, and something had been controlling his strings. *But it didn't matter.* Because it still had been him that had done the deeds. Still his hands that could never become clean (out, damned spot; out, I say). It was him that had to deal with the consequences.

(And, even though Doc Owens had told him about the cover story – mall collapse, many people trapped and presumed dead, bodies never recovered – Billy was worried that people would pass him on the street and they'd know, *they'd just know*, that it was his fault so many people were dead.)

Yeah, Owens didn't understand anything. And Billy wasn't ever going to try to explain it to him. Because, even though Owens had said *he was there to listen and our talks are confidential, Billy, you can tell me anything* and *I'm just focused on your recovery*, Billy knew that was total bullshit. Owens was there as the government's fixer – and what better way to fix things than to sweep it under the rug. So, Billy wouldn't tell Owens anything – nothing about the voice that was talking to him in the back of his head, the one that sounded like the

Mind Flayer, nothing about Neil and his abuse, even though Owens had brought it up on more than one occasion (Billy had repeatedly said he was fine), nothing about the fact that he was in love with Steve and that, perhaps, Steve loved him back. Besides, Billy was pretty sure someone was always listening to him – his room was probably bugged.

No, Billy was going to be the model patient, a doormat, a blank canvas. He was going to do anything he could to get himself out of the hospital; he couldn't let himself relax in here. He probably wouldn't be able to relax once he'd been released, not until he was certain that he was wholly himself again.

In this way, May seemed to pass like a dream, a series of fractured images that Billy tried to string together. Continuity was lost and Billy felt like his life was a movie being played in fast forward, slowing only when the tape was stretched and distorted.

Billy's awareness of time was completely fucked up. It didn't help that he'd been in a coma for ten fucking months. He was almost a full year older. He'd lost that time and would never get it back.

But, he supposed, when he'd found himself awake in the middle of the night with moonlight shining through the open blinds of his window, he didn't really deserve that time back. Not when he'd taken away so many years through all the lives he'd given the Mind Flayer. The guilt and the self-loathing were tidal waves in his mind and they crashed over him again and again and again.

Maybe it was because Billy had been in a coma for ten months, or maybe it was just the nature of scars this size, or maybe Billy's karma had just caught up with him. Or maybe it was something else entirely. But the scars hurt, or rather, not the actual scars themselves because those seem to convey only muted feelings at best, but the skin just adjacent to the scars. The scars lack the elasticity of normal skin, so they pulled and tugged at the skin around them. They left Billy in pain, constantly shifting as if he was wearing a shirt that's just a little bit too small – that was tight across the shoulders and chest, something that he was continually adjusting so it'd hang

better, constrict less, stop suffocating him. But it wasn't a shirt, it was his body now, and he was going to have to accept that he'll always be in pain, he'll always have these aches spreading through his torso. Billy was okay with that; he deserved so much worse. But maybe this was the universe's way of punishing him – he didn't deserve that quick death, didn't deserve the eternal sleep, didn't deserve to be free of his guilt. Guilt abounds. He didn't get a free pass.

By the end of May, Billy's frustration at himself, his brain, his body, his lack of energy, his slow rate of healing, his whispering mind began to bubble over. And his resolution of being the model patient was beginning to fray at the edges.

It wasn't until the end of May that Steve finally admitted to himself that he missed Billy. You would think that it would be impossible to miss someone who was now *awake* from a coma. But Steve had somehow managed it. It wasn't as if he stopped seeing Billy, because he still saw him – not as often as he couldn't slip at three in the morning anymore, and Billy now had daily physio sessions that sometimes fell during the time that Steve had planned to visit – so, yes, it was partly because Steve didn't see him as often. But.

But it was also because Steve could no longer talk to him. He didn't know how to communicate with a Billy who was awake, a Billy who could talk back. Steve had spent ten months asking Billy to wake up and he got his wish, but now he didn't know what to do. Steve didn't know how to act around Billy at all. Their last interaction had been when Billy was dying on the mall floor. And the ones before: basketball games, passing each other at house parties, eye contact at the school parking lot before class, they in no way helped Steve steer his interactions. Because Billy was no longer that Billy and, well, Steve was definitely no longer that Steve.

It didn't help that they weren't talking about *it*.

It didn't help that Steve wanted to grab Billy's hand every time he

saw Billy just to reassure himself that Billy was awake and alive. It didn't help that Steve wanted to hold Billy's arm and let Billy lean on him when he was moving slowly from his bed to physio or even his bed to the attached bathroom. It didn't help that Steve wanted to stroke Billy's hair, soothe away the crease between Billy's eyebrows, rub the muscles that clenched around Billy's jaw.

Steve had to physically stop himself from doing these things because they violated the unspoken agreement he and Billy had made – don't talk about it, don't talk about Steve's confession (although Steve wasn't sure how much Billy had actually heard), don't talk about them holding hands, don't talk about Billy maybe, possibly (hopefully) still being in love with him.

So, now, Steve questioned every interaction, everything he said, everything Billy said; Steve questioned everything.

"Of course you're questioning everything," Robin said, when Steve had finally told her what was bothering him. It was the last week of May and they had an overlapping shift at Family Video.

"Of course?" Steve repeated, because to him, it wasn't an 'of course' situation, it wasn't obvious.

Robin popped her gum and put a VHS back into its case. "Firstly, it's your nature to be suspicious and paranoid."

"It is?" Steve asked, passing her another rewind tape.

She grabbed it and said, "Well, considering what happened, we're *all* suspicious and paranoid."

Steve gave a small nod, because, yes, that was true. Robin was jumpy and sometimes, after a sleepless night, he could see her eyes darting back and forth as if she was expecting someone to jump out at her from around the corner.

"Right," Robin continued, "so you're naturally, and rightly, suspicious. So you're not taking things at face value, you're expecting things to be not as they appear."

"Riiight," Steve said, dragging out the word; he wasn't sure where

Robin was going with this.

“Right,” Robin agreed. “And even more-so with Billy.”

“Huh?”

Robin sighed. “Well,” she said, leaning against the counter, giving Steve her undivided attention, Steve mimicked the posture, but had to lean more to bring himself down to her eye level. “First Billy was a giant dick,” Robin continued. “Anger issues,” she raised her index finger, “overly aggressive,” she raised her middle finger, “supposed huge ladies’ man,” she added and raised her ring finger.

“Wait,” Steve interrupted, “aren’t anger issues and being overly aggressive the same thing?”

“They’re probably linked,” Robin acquiesced, “but, in Billy’s case, I guess I mean, and this is only from what you told me, I never interacted with the guy, he was quick to anger, could go from zero to sixty with almost no provocation.”

Steve unconsciously touched the scar on his temple and nodded.

“Right, so we’ll say quick to anger. And then what I mean by overly aggressive, is everything had to be a competition with him. Like when you guys played basketball, he always had to be the best. Basically, stealing your title—”

Steve sighed, loudly. He’d told Robin over and over that it wasn’t like that. He didn’t care about the title or its loss.

Robin grinned. “I know,” she said, “you don’t care about being king. But that’s not what it was about.” She paused, looking thoughtful, “Or, at least, that’s not the only reason, given what you know now about him.”

“Oh?”

“Clearly,” Robin said, voice tinged with exasperation, “he wanted to get your attention. And what’s the best way of doing that? Taking the thing that should matter the most to you: your title, your position in the social hierarchy.”

“But I don’t – didn’t – care about that,” Steve said.

“But he didn’t know that.”

“So he wanted to piss me off?” Steve asked, trying and failing to understand what Robin was getting at.

“I don’t think that was his main goal,” Robin said, “maybe a side perk if he’s a bit of a masochist.”

“Huh?”

Robin sighed and rolled her eyes. “Steve, he wanted your attention, I already said that, but he wanted you solely focused on him because he *liked you*.” She lowered her voice and added, “And when you’re queer, especially in a tiny backwards town, you take what you can get. As far as Billy was concerned, you were Steve Harrington: Jock, prep, prom-king extraordinaire, but, most importantly, *straight*.”

Steve swallowed, but didn’t say anything; what Robin had said was completely true, or it had been almost a year and a half ago, when Billy had pulled up to the high school with his own soundtrack.

“Right,” Robin said, as if she was agreeing with the things that Steve had just thought – he was pretty sure he hadn’t spoken them aloud. “So, you’re Billy Hargrove, you’re worried about being outed in a new town. And,” she added, frowning, “you’re regularly getting beaten up by your piece of shit dad.”

Steve’s stomach clenched as the rage he felt for Neil flooded through him.

“And,” Robin continued, “you’ve got a crush on the most stereotypical straight guy you’ve ever met.”

“Hey,” Steve blurted out, “that’s not true...”

“Steve, do you remember how I just described you?” Robin waited with one eyebrow until Steve nodded. “Okay,” she said, “so what do you do? You try to get his attention in the way most dumb teenage boys do – by trying to one-up him. And, in doing so, you’re able to show that you’re like other teenage boys to everyone, including your

biological progenitor – Neil,” she explained at Steve’s blank look.

“Okay...?”

“So, if you don’t think the guy you have a crush on is going to like you back, you settle for what you can get: his attention, his ire, his... fear.”

“That,” Steve swallowed to clear his throat, “that sucks. We could’ve been friends.”

Robin let out a little laugh, but it was tinged with a bitter edge. “You’ve probably never had to be *just* friends with someone you wanted more from. Believe me when I tell you that it sucks. You spend half your time trying to convince yourself that you’re fine with being *friends* with them. You spend the other half of your time reading into everything they say or do trying to find some small sign that they perhaps feel the same way for you as you do for them. And everything slowly eats away you, because you’re constantly battling between resignation and elation. And every time that small sign turns out to be nothing, the despair you feel, the *frustration* you feel, it worms in deeper. It whispers at you, telling you it’s your fault that they don’t want you, that you’ll never be happy, because how can you be happy if you’re hiding this fundamental part of your identity? So, more often than not, you grow resentful. And it hurts too much to stay friends; you end up letting that person drift away. Because it’s easier.”

“Robin, I – I,” Steve stopped, he wasn’t sure what he could say. He thought back to all his experiences with girls – and now Billy – and couldn’t think of one that fit Robin’s description. If he liked a girl, he’d gone after her. “That sounds awful.”

Robin nodded, “It really is.”

And Steve wondered if Robin was thinking about someone in particular or if this had happened a number of times to her. Steve briefly wondered if she’d ever told any of these girls how she felt about them but decided that Robin was too smart to do that. That shit could get you killed.

The world sucked and Steve hated it.

He wondered if Robin had only told him the truth because she had found out that Hawkins harboured monsters and Steve hadn't told anyone about them. He wondered if maybe she told him the truth because she had thought she was going to die; tortured to death by Soviets or eaten by a monster in a human-suit. But he hoped that she'd actually told him the truth because she had known that they were going to be friends – best friends, in fact. He wondered and wondered and wondered.

“Well,” Steve said, “now you’ve got me – I’ll never drift away because we don’t like each other like that. You’re stuck with me now, Buckley.” He hoped this joke would break the mood; he couldn’t handle deep emotional conversations that often, and Steve was pretty sure he’d met his 1986 quota for them in May.

Robin let out a chuckle that was wet sounding around the edges. She sniffed and said, “And what a fine pair we make.”

“Wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“Well that was a fun diversion,” Robin said, with a wry smile, implying it was anything but fun. “But we’ve lost the point of the conversation.”

“Right...,” said Steve, trying to remember what had even started this conversation.

“You’re questioning everything with Billy.”

“Right!” he nodded emphatically. “Yes. So what should I do?”

“You’re gonna hate me,” Robin said, shifting slightly and shoving her hands into her pockets, “but maybe give it some time? He’s just woken up, things are probably really confusing for him as it is, you know?”

Steve nodded again, trying to imagine what it would be like to wake up the next day and realize almost a whole year of his life was gone. He couldn’t fathom it.

“So,” Robin continued, “maybe just try to support him in the way that he needs right now? And when he’s feeling better, more settled, more himself, bring up what you said to him.”

“Okay,” Steve replied, swallowing, just knowing that not saying anything to Billy was possibly going to drive him right up to and perhaps over the edge. The knot in his stomach and his anxiety could only take so much.

But he was willing to try for Billy’s sake.

It was June before Billy had enough strength and motor control that he could get out of bed on his own. It frustrated him to the point of tears that he’d gone from someone who was strong and powerful (even without the Mind Flayer’s supernatural ‘roid-rage addition) to someone who was so weak that he had to stop for breaks on the ten-foot trek to the bathroom.

(If Billy had mentioned this level of exhaustion to Steve, Steve would have had flashbacks to the night they’d stopped the Mind Flayer, when he’d considered setting up camp in the hallway between his bathroom and bedroom. If Billy had mentioned the fear of the Mind Flayer that had been growing since he’d woken up – the voices that whispered at the base of his skull, prodding his lizard brain with electrical shocks that sent his stomach plummeting, Steve would have had flashbacks to the endless cycle of nightmares and waking visions that had plagued him for months following that night last July. If Billy had managed to unstick his tongue from the roof of his mouth, sip some water, get that saliva flowing, and, finally, get some words out whenever Steve stopped by with that mask of a carefree teen slipping from his face, maybe Billy would have been able to recognize the things that were real and the things that weren’t.

But he didn’t.

And Steve never asked, because he hadn’t known to ask.)

In physiotherapy, Billy walked up and down the hallway. Some days he needed a walker, some days he needed to hold onto Paul, his legs shaking and clumsy. But he could tell he was getting stronger, his body was listening to his brain and the muscles were responding, relearning the motor control he'd had prior to the coma.

His energy levels, though, they were still depleted, still barely there. He remembered driving from Cali to Hawkins, remembered when he'd first reached that house on Cherry Lane and his body had wanted to sink into the seat, sink into the ground and just dissipate into the dirt and bedrock. He remembered wondering how his body had the energy to keep from flying apart, how his skin had the strength to keep his bones inside, his organs contained, how things wouldn't just fall onto the ground in a formless puddle (much like the Mind Flayer's victims had dissolved in their final moments). And Billy still wondered this, as he slowly put one foot in front of the other, if he was somehow irrevocably altered and his body was using more and more energy to keep its shape. If he, too, would end up like everyone else the Mind Flayer had controlled, fed chemicals to, made murderers of, as a toxic sludge on dirty floor.

But his body still remained whole and Billy still walked. Paul was there to cheer him on, saying things like "You'll be bench pressing in no time" and "Soon you'll be running circles around me" as he clapped Billy on the shoulder with enough force that Billy swayed back and forth for minutes afterwards. Billy never responded to these comments, just gritted his teeth and focused on picking up his foot and putting it down in front of the other in a clumsy mimicry of a walk.

Everyone lauded his progress – Paul, Nurse Dean, Doc Owens, Joyce – but Billy was still frustrated. All he could think of was where his body had been – it had been the one thing he could control in his life. It had been armour – people saw him but they hadn't actually *seen* him. They'd seen a stereotypical teenaged boy, so focused on his appearance, his physical prowess, his standing in the social hierarchy, that they didn't think to look any deeper. Billy knew what people saw when they looked at him and he'd used it to his advantage, to make his life easier, used it to make sure Neil hadn't looked too closely at

him.

(Because, even though Billy knew he was going end up in a hole in the ground like his mother, perhaps dead years before and just waiting for his body to catch up, a small part of Billy – the smallest part that he couldn't quite smother – hoped he'd actually make it to adulthood. And, if he made it that far, if Neil hadn't found out about him and killed him for it, then maybe he could find a way to be content, if not altogether happy.

But he had made it to adulthood, was almost nineteen in fact, and he couldn't see any way for him to have any kind of normal life.

It had been a pipe dream.)

So Billy walked, grateful that his body was young enough to bounce back from the horrific treatment he'd put it through – or had been compelled to put it through. But he could tell that it would never return to what it was – he'd never return to what he was. His lungs crackled whenever he breathed – scar tissue they'd told him – it was possible his breathing would get better, but not likely. Billy knew he'd never be a long-distance runner, not that he was before, but he liked having his options open. His heart had been damaged his doctors told him to avoid strain, caffeine, excessive alcohol, cigarettes; all the vices he'd used to cope had been taken away. They said they'd re-evaluate after he made progress in physio, but any kind of strenuous exercise was out of the question.

All Billy could see was a life of control and restraint, of seeing all the things he could've had or could've done or could've been that had been taken away.

At least you're still alive to see those things, a small voice whispered in the back of his mind.

A louder voice added, *think of all those people – they're never going to have things, do things, or be anyone else except who they were in their last moments. All because of you. You deserve this torture; this is your punishment.*

Billy found himself nodding, agreeing with the harsher voice, the one

that crackled with electricity that circled around in his brain – he did deserve this punishment, but he didn't know if he could bear it.

Billy sat on the edge of his bed, bare legs dangling, rubbing the muscles in his thighs. His legs were pale and thin like they'd been when he was fourteen, before Danny had taken him under his wing. But Billy was no longer fourteen, no longer balanced between innocence and cynicism – although he was as floundering and graceless as he had been back then, as his brain didn't know where this new version of himself ended. Billy was spiralling into despair, letting the voices in his brain drag him down and leach at what little energy was remaining – innocence and cynicism were luxuries he no longer had the energy for.

"I brought you juice," Steve said as he walked into Billy's room, startling Billy out of his thoughts. Billy saw him briefly glance Billy's legs and he wondered what Steve was thinking – did he feel disgust? Or pity? Or nothing at all? – Billy didn't really want to know.

Taking the juice with a small nod, Billy muttered, "I'm not even sure if I'm allowed to have juice." He flipped the bottle over in his hands, staring at it but taking nothing in.

"I cleared it with Doctor Owens," Steve responded, cracking his own bottle open and taking a small sip.

Billy had noticed that Steve had stopped drinking coffee around him or talking about his weekend (or weekday) alcohol binges when Billy had confessed to him what the doctors had said about his heart – Billy had been too distraught to keep it in, shove it down with the mass of snakes of guilt that writhed in his stomach. On most days, Billy appreciated what Steve was trying to do, being considerate and not flaunt the things that Billy couldn't have. But, on some days, Billy wanted to take Steve by the shoulders and shake him, to yell that what Steve was doing just reminded Billy of all the things that had *changed*. Sometimes Billy just wanted to pretend. Sometimes Billy just wanted to cry – mourn for himself and all the things he'd lost. But he didn't say anything – not now, not previously, not ever.

Instead, he struggled with the fine motor skills and strength it took to twist off the cap of the juice and tried to slow his breathing and swallow around the lump of frustrated tears that was growing in his throat. He could see Steve's shoulders slump in his periphery and knew that Steve was beating himself up over not loosening the cap – Billy remembered enough of what Steve had told him over the last few months of his coma to know exactly where Steve's thoughts were going.

And that was the real problem. That was the elephant in the room. Billy didn't know how to bring up the fact that he remembered a lot of what Steve had told him. Billy knew about Steve's relationship with his parents – and if he ever saw them on the street, he was going to punch them both in the face, even if it did land him in jail for assault, he'd already killed people, assault was nothing. Billy knew about Steve's loneliness, his problems sleeping (hell, he'd known about those before the coma – the bags under Steve's eyes were a neon sign to attest to that), his main method of coping: drinking hard liquor and patrolling his house with a bat full of nails and all the lights on. Billy knew that Steve's best friend was Robin and Robin liked girls. And, most importantly, Billy knew that Steve had *feelings for him*.

Most people wrote Billy off as a dumb jock with a short fuse. And that was mostly true; he was a jock with a short fuse, but he wasn't dumb (and he might not be a jock anymore, given his current circumstances). And he was very good at reading people.

So, yes, Steve had confessed to hoping that Billy still loved him and that he wanted that.

(And, yes, Billy still loved him – but those feelings were buried underneath the layers of anger and doubt and guilt that had arisen once he woke up from that stupid coma – and he wasn't going to admit to that to Steve right now. Or maybe ever, depending on how things unfolded.)

But Billy knew it was one thing to say those things and not expect an answer and something else entirely to actually confess something like that to someone who could respond (or was awake and mostly coherent). And Steve had been firmly in the former camp, because,

honestly, who expected someone to wake up from a come during a love confession? That bullshit only happened in daytime soaps or the Harlequins that Susan liked to read. And that left them at an awkward impasse, neither willing to bring it up, afraid of what the other would say, the consequences that would come with the inevitable fallout. It was an uncomfortable game of chicken that neither, as far as Billy could tell, was willing to pull out of.

At least Steve was still coming to visit him, that gave Billy hope that the possibility of a relationship of some sort between them still existed.

So the elephant in the room waited. And watched as Billy finally untwisted the cap off his juice and brought the bottle to his mouth with shaking hands. He could never predict which things were going to exhaust him – it was a never-ending game of Russian Roulette that he played with every single task he had to face. Billy slid off the edge of the bed, took a few unsteady steps to the swivel table near the head of his bed, and placed the juice on it, not risking the embarrassment of trying to put the cap back on.

“You mind?” Billy asked, nodding his head back towards the bed, “Paul put me through the paces today, was gonna lie down.”

Steve shot up, saying, “Right, of course, I’ll just be–”

“Stay,” Billy blurted out, louder than he’d intended. He licked his lips and added in a softer voice, “Please, I don’t really want to be alone with my thoughts.”

Steve looked stricken and Billy felt anxiety slide into his guts, taking up residence with the snakes. He used to be able to read people so well and now he–

take him

–couldn’t.

“If you don’t want, I understand,” Billy said, trying to make himself sound unaffected, as he hoisted himself up onto the bed and swung his legs around.

"I do," Steve said. Billy heard him swallow and Steve added, "But I don't know how distracting I'll be."

Billy cautiously lifted his eyes to Steve's face as pulled up the covers – Steve looked like he wanted to run away, his eyes darting from Billy's face to the door and back again.

"Anything is gonna be more distracting than staring at these walls," Billy said with a small smile, settling back against the pillow. "Besides," he added, "I doubt I'll be awake long anyway; you'll have plenty of time to escape to your hot date."

Steve snorted and relaxed back into the chair. "Right. Hot date. The only person I see more than you is Robin and that's 'cause we work together. Man, I dunno when the last time was that I went on a date."

"What?" Billy said with a smirk, "you got through all the available chicks already? Steve, I'm impressed." He winked and let his patented grin spread across his face.

Steve sighed and stared down at his juice. Billy wondered if he was wishing that it was spiked with something. Ha, for all Billy knew, it was spiked and Steve would slip into that initial tipsy phase that loosened his tongue and unknotted the muscles in his shoulders. Billy watched him, waiting to see if Steve would laugh it off like the last few times Billy had played this game with him.

Finally, Steve said, "Nah, I don't do that anymore." He took a sip of his juice and peered at Billy over the top, eyebrows raised. Was their game of chicken going to hit the next level now?

Billy draped his hands in his laps and noticed the sun had started setting – it was much later in the day than he'd realized. "Okay," he mused, "no girls piqued King Steve's interest."

Steve jerked up, mouth open, as if he was about to protest the old nickname, but he slammed it shut, teeth clicking, and sat back, eyes wary.

"Not girls," Billy repeated, voice thoughtful, but heart racing over what he was going to say. "Any guys then?" he asked, lowering his

voice into something that bordered on husky and flirtatious. “Tommy decide to give in to that crush he’s been nursing on you for years? Finally decide to ditch that bitch of a redhead and confess his undying love for you?”

“Wh-what?” Steve spluttered out, the tops of his cheeks turning pink.

“No then,” Billy remarked. “Or,” he added, sitting up with a grin, “just no to Tommy?”

“What?” Steve said, again, mouth gaping and face turning entirely red.

“Tommy,” Billy repeated, settling back against his pillows, letting his eyes wander up to the ceiling, “he finally tell you he wants to fuck you? Or maybe it was you fuck him – can’t remember, too much Jack that night.”

“What?” Steve said for a third time, voice flat.

Billy dropped his grin and looked at Steve–

What are you doing? that small voice whispered. Are you trying to get him off-balance? Trying to make him mad? Spread some of your hurt and anger to him? Are you wanting him on the same uneven ground as you?

Why?

Billy bowed his head and stared at his hands feeling the shame spread through him. “Sorry,” he said, voice returning to its usual timbre and volume, “he told me that in confidence and I shouldn’t’ve anything. Hell, I don’t think he remembers anything from that night anyway.”

“Which night?” Steve asked, leaning forward, resting his elbows on his knees, dropping his head.

“Sorry?”

“What night did Tommy tell you that? Must’ve been early on, didn’t he stop hanging out with you after you beat the shit outta me?”

Billy nodded cautiously, waiting to see where Steve was going with this.

“Was that,” Steve swallowed audibly, “because of me?”

“Maybe – can’t say for sure, since y’know, he stopped talking to me. Coulda been the month after that I had to pretend to hate him so he’d stop bugging me to go to parties with him.” At Steve’s confused expression, Billy added, “It’s hard to drink when taking a piss is agony. Or, y’know, trying to stand straight is like breathing through shards of glass.”

Steve jerked his head back, eyes widening in what Billy assumed was surprise or shock.

“Max didn’t tell you?” Billy asked, not surprised.

Steve slowly shook his head.

“Of course not,” Billy muttered, “it’s not like she cared what Neil did to me courtesy of their fucking trip with my Camaro? How much trouble I’d been in when I showed up the next day sans one car and one teenaged redhead?” Billy could hear the bitterness in his voice, but he couldn’t stop the words from spilling out. “She didn’t say that Neil had been angry – drunk enough that he didn’t hold back when he lashed out with his fists, boots, belt? No, of course not,” Billy repeated, hating the way the lump in his throat had made his voice high and breathy. He swallowed, feeling his throat click. “But it’s not like she would’ve known, really, not unless she’d actually wanted to find out – as soon as Neil started yelling Susan grabbed her and they went *shopping*,” he hissed out the last word, feeling a grin stretch across his face as tears leaked out of the corners of his eyes.

Steve stood up, mouth drawn into a thin line, hand lifting as if he wanted to give Billy some comfort but wasn’t sure what Billy would do.

Billy flinched back, that’s what he did, afraid of the pity that was filling Steve’s eyes, and Steve sat back down, pinning his hands between his knees.

“No,” Billy repeated, voice flat and emotionless, “she didn’t tell you shit because I’m the bad guy, and I deserved it, right? I deserved those broken ribs, that concussion, all those fucking bruises. Even though she’d been fighting *actual monsters*, it was me that deserved that kind of punishment.” Billy was breathing hard, his words coming out in short bursts.

“Billy...” Steve said, hesitantly, and Billy knew that Steve wanted to stand up and reach out – he could see the way Steve’s knees were pressed tightly together, forcing Steve’s hands to stay still.

“Don’t worry, Steve, I deserved it. I know that now. Shoulda just egged him on, made him keep going, right? Then I wouldn’t’ve done the things I did. Right?” Billy’s voice was pleading at the end and this time, Steve did stand up.

“Billy,” Steve repeated, voice less hesitant, as he walked to the head of Billy’s bed.

“It’s okay, Steve,” Billy said, closing his eyes, not wanting to see whatever emotion was spreading across Steve’s face. “You shoulda just left earlier – forget I said anything – Tommy’s a dick but even he doesn’t deserve what’s gonna happen to him if the rest of those rednecks find out about his... feelings.”

Billy heard Steve take a few slow deep breaths and footsteps. This was it; Billy had finally pushed him away. His mouth tasted sour and he wondered if he was going to be sick.

“Max was – is – just a kid,” Steve said, voice coming from the foot of Billy’s bed. “But you were too – you didn’t deserve any of what Neil did to you or the Mind Flayer – any of it.”

Billy cracked open his eyes to see Steve walking towards him, his expression sombre, dark eyes serious and sad. When he got to the head of Billy’s bed, Steve reached out – hesitancy gone – and clasped Billy’s upper arm quickly, stroking his thumb along the outside of Billy’s arm. Steve let it go and stepped back, meeting Billy’s eyes.

“I know you’re trying to push me away,” Steve said, voice softer, “but it’s not gonna work – I’m your friend – unless you really don’t want

me to be. But,” he added with a dejected sounding chuckle, “I’m a little short on friends right now. And I’d rather be friends with you than try to find new ones. Shared trauma, y’know? Who else can I talk to about this bullshit who actually realizes how completely fucked this situation is?”

Billy snorted.

Steve grinned and then his face sobered as he said, “But I really think you should talk to someone – what you’re feeling, what you’ve been through, hell, anyone in your situation would have to talk to someone to get their head on straight.”

Billy breathed out through his nose, irritation rising in his chest. “Is that what you’re doing, Steve? You talkin’ to someone? You tellin’ them about your nightmares? Your paranoia? Your insomnia? Steve, are you talkin’ to someone about your parents?”

Steve stepped back as if Billy’s words had physically struck him. “Wh-what?” Steve breathed out.

And Billy knew that he’d put himself into a situation he wasn’t ready for. He’d given away that he remembered some of what Steve had told him while he was in the coma. Because Steve’s conversations since Billy’d woken up were superficial. Steve hadn’t brought anything up that he thought would have upset Billy, or at least that’s what Billy assumed.

“Yeah,” Billy snapped, “that’s what I thought. How about we make a deal? Hmm, Steve? I talk to Owens when you do? You let me know how it feels to have someone rooting around in your head? Well, I guess not literally. Because, let me tell you, that’s a doozy, one real fucked up situation. Sound like fun to you?” Billy spat out.

Steve went to take another step back but Billy lashed out and grabbed his wrist. Billy’s hold wasn’t that strong, nothing like on the basketball court months – years ago now – when he’d told Steve to draw a charge, but Steve didn’t jerk away. He looked from Billy’s hand around his wrist to Billy’s face. And Billy was so tempted to run his thumb over Steve’s pulse point, to feel the thin skin there, feel the breakable bones. He was so tempted to squeeze, feel the bones give

under his grip, dig his nails in to Steve's thin skin, to gain back his power—

do it

—somehow. But he didn't. He forced those urges back. Instead he flung Steve's hand away and repeated, "That's what I thought."

Steve licked his lips and rubbed his wrist as if Billy had strength in his grip, as if the Billy that had just grabbed him was the one from before the coma instead of the weakling that lay before Steve now.

"Go away, King Steve, I'm tired," Billy muttered, closing his eyes, as if he could make Steve disappear by simply not seeing him.

"You're doing it again," Steve said, after a minute of staring at Billy's face, taking in the furrowed lines between his brows, and the pinched, downturned position of his mouth. "You're trying to push me away."

Billy didn't move, didn't make any sign that he was aware Steve was talking.

"It's not that easy to piss me off," Steve added, taking a few steps closer to Billy's bed. He leaned over and whispered, "One day you're going to want to talk about it and I'll still be here. I. Will. Still. Be. Here."

Billy's eyes opened and he whispered, "There's no way you can guarantee that, Harrington. No way."

Steve grinned. "Sure there is – I am an excellent babysitter, that means I'm dependable. So depend on me and believe me when I say that I'm not going anywhere, not as long as you want me here."

Billy exhaled and Steve heard the shaky edge to it. He could see Billy's uncertainty spreading over his face and he opened his mouth,

but Steve cut him off before he could start to argue.

“Billy, I know it’s hard to trust people. But can you trust that I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t want to be? I don’t think you’re a monster, you didn’t deserve what happened to you. I just want you to heal.” Steve wanted more things for Billy, but he didn’t want to freak Billy out. Small steps. Be what Billy needs, like Robin said.

Billy nodded, dropping Steve’s gaze, looking small and forlorn and lost.

So Steve did what he’d wanted someone to do when he felt this way – he leaned over and wrapped his arms around Billy, cupping Billy’s shoulders with his hands instead of trying to force them under Billy’s body – Steve wanted to make sure he could quickly let go if Billy jerked back. He felt Billy freeze for a second and then two, three, ten. Steve was just about to pull back when Billy exhaled and Steve felt his body loosen under him. Billy didn’t wrap his arms around Steve but he turned his head and Steve felt Billy breathing into the crook of Steve’s neck.

“It’s okay,” Steve whispered, running his thumbs over Billy’s shoulders, feeling Billy’s breath ghosting over him, making goosebumps spring up over his back. “You’re okay,” he added, “we’ll figure it out.”

Steve said what he’d wanted someone to say to him almost a year ago when he’d been drowning in filth and anger and despair, unsure if he’d be able to pick himself up and put himself back together.

“You’re okay,” Steve repeated.

And he felt Billy finally nod his head slowly against Steve’s neck as if he didn’t quite agree with Steve’s words but was agreeing to let Steve help him.

Notes for the Chapter:

As always, stay safe everyone. I love all of you.

Author’s Note:

The series title, work title, and chapter titles come from [Constant Knot](#) by City and Colour. I love him!

Beta'd by the wonderful [red_plaid_on_red_plaid](#)

I'm on tumblr! You can find me @ [coffeeandchemicals](#). (Spoiler alert - I do not know how to tumblr at all.)

Any feedback is greatly appreciated!